New social movements: do they defend poor people's interests?

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Abstract: The political relevancy of 'new' social movements, particularly at a time the world is witnessing huge unequal power relations among society, is increasingly becoming vital. New social movements are perceived as a formidable challenge to authority, dominance and political system in society. Their primary aims are to fix the gaps within the society regarding economic, social and political inequalities. The citizen-driven approach to recreate the roles of society and State, particularly in the modern democracies, is what's labelled as 'new social movement' of which the essay particularly sheds light on. The point of the essay is to examine how the 'new' social movements defend poor people's interests citing examples of new global incidents in Latin America (particularly Mexico) and the Arab world. Furthermore, the essay draws a line between 'new' and 'old' social movement at the beginning while also explaining their distinctive features in terms of goals, development and tactics. In the end, the essay's argument is based on the notion that new social movements (NSMs) defend poor people's interests even though there is conflictual orientation among members of new social movements.

I. Introduction

From as early as French revolution up to the present Arab Spring, social movements have been an integral part that shapes the distribution of power among different segments of societies. Though their developments as well as their roles have widely changed over the years, one thing that remained a key is their influence in redefining the state's role in relations to the economics, culture and politics of populace. The significance of social movements has equally touched upon the value system of people, both present and past. In the contemporary times, social movements play a critical role in resisting authority, international rules and authoritarian regimes. Their impact, according to Dalton, et al., (1990), is almost felt in all across the world in different extents, in terms of making or unmaking political and social institutions both in democratic and authoritarian systems.

With this in mind, social movements are indispensable not only for all those who are not contented with current cultural and political order but as well as to those who enjoy the privileges of the system; so that they fully become cautious of the fragility of their institutions and their interactions in the future (Wilkinson, 1971). As such or because of the fact, the impact and

influence of social movements is far-reaching, and thus we cannot be able to have a proper understanding of the question of social and political institutions and their functions unless we sharpen our understanding of the concept of social movements.

The term 'new' social movements, however, signifies a symbol of modern life which was pioneered as a new feature for collective action in early 1970s in the Western capitalist world. Their principal focus was to address the social, political and cultural imperfections such as the exclusion of essential parts of the middle class from political decision-making machinery. According to Leo d'Anjou and John Van Male(1998), the new social movements are concerned about the dynamics of challenges against authorities, thereby reflecting the prevailed resistance of authority. The new social movements, as they argue, are not meant to portray the message of their primary actors and their relations- but they are an emblem of cultural occurrence (Mitlin, 2013). Therefore, the actors who organise a social movement- old and new- should envision their future; come up with solutions for their society's ills (a diagnosis), picture how the process should be accomplished (a prognosis), and finally inspire their members to bring about the reforms and changes needed within their society (motivation). William (1994) agrees with Fine (1995) that social movement actors must give meaning to events, situations, and social practices by directing their particular accounts at authorities, and the members of public while they serve as signifying agents alongside other actors like mass media and government agencies (Diani & Bison, 2004).

For many poor people across the world, change seems beyond the control of the individual. Their influence on job creation, education and health services is little as far as development is concerned. Nor do they exercise control over inflation, the unemployment rates, or strong economic policies. Therefore, as Scipes (1992) argue that shared experience and suffering of poor and marganised people under regimes that show so little symphaty to their cause is what inspires the common fights. As a result, millions of poor people come out to the streets and substantially fight together for a common cause leading to a tremendous political, social, and economic changes. These would not have been possible unless they share similar plight (i.e. poverty) which binds them together to fight joint battle so as to recreate their society and reshape the roles of the states through social conflict with people of the authorities.

The remaining part of the essay proceeds as follows: Part II discusses the meaning of the critical terms used (i.e. New Social Movements and Poverty 'or poor people'). Part III attempts to build a theoretical framework enlightening the nexus between 'new' and 'old' social movements. Part IV deals with the question more specifically, looking at both sides of the coin while I argue that 'NSMs defend poor people's interests' citing examples from different parts of the world, most notably Latin America and the Arab world. Part VI concludes.

II: Social Movements: Meanings and Types

Key to answering the question is, first of all, to define what is meant by 'social movement'. The term 'social movement' is described as a series of coordinated activities engendered by individuals or a group of individuals whose aims are to 'change' the prevailed social, political and economic order within their society; thereby collective efforts of the members become indispensable to achieve a remarkable success at the end. The usage of the term, however, is an ambiguous among political leaders and social activists. Social movements are, according to Wilkinson (1971), 'a deliberate communal endeavour to promote change in any direction and through any means, not excluding violence, illegality, revolution or withdrawal into 'utopian' community'. For Charles (1982), he provides the a detailed definition of social movement, 'a sustained series of interactions between power-holders and persons successfully claiming to speak on behalf of a constituency lacking formal representation, the course of which those persons make publicly visible demands for changes in the distribution or exercise of power, and back those demands with public demonstrations of support.' Blumer (1995) sums up the above definitions by looking at social movements from the aspect of collective actions taken by member's who wish to establish a new order within their society.

In their book, *Challenging the Political Order: New Social and Political Movements in Western Democracies*, Dalton & Kuechler (1990) discuss the term 'new social movements (NSMs)' which they define it as "new social groups demanding that democracies open their political process to a more diverse and citizen-oriented set of interests." These scholars claim that new social movements are 'new' because 'the core of these groups is a qualitatively new aspect of citizen politics in industrialised and capitalist Western democracies 'which was firstly introduced in the late 1960s (Veltmeyer, 1997; Cohen & Rai, 2001). This meaning, however, makes a special sense once related to the poor and vulnerable communities who wish to make a social and cultural change within a political system which has no sympathy for their cause. Poverty as such is a multifaceted idea which touches upon the social, economic and political aspects of people's lives. It is thus powerlessness to having choices and opportunities. As a result, the 'poor people' can be labelled as people who are disadvantaged in this regard and have more sufferings which are hardly noticeable. This gives a room to the new social movements to take action in these realities (mostly in the developing world) responding to the similar experiences and predicaments of the poor and disadvantaged groups within society (Mitlin, 2013).

As per the above definitions, all of them share three essential elements: collective action; a common purpose and collective identity, which all describe the essence of social movements. According to Diani & Bison (2004), the understanding of social movements is inseparably attached public face of social and cultural conflict. Collective action is meant to unite efforts to redress injustices, accomplish public goods and eliminate social grievances by identifying specific

targets. More interestingly, the presence of numerous informal groups who yet pursue common goals and are coordinated within defined boundaries, without losing autonomy, is a defining feature of the new social movements (Dalton, et al., 1990, Diani & Bison, 2004). The collective identity is as important as the other two aspects, collective action and common purpose. Collective identity, according to Touraine (1981), is 'a process strongly associated with recognition and the creation of connectedness…which brings with it a sense of common purpose and shared commitment to a cause, which enables single activists and organizations to regard themselves as inextricably linked to other actors, not necessarily identical but surely compatible, in a broader collective mobilization.'

III: Distinctions between 'New' and 'Old' Social Movements

Having defined the key terms, a prerequisite for responding to the above question is again to draw a line between the 'new' and 'old' social movements (NSMs). New Social Movements, in the words of Hallsworth (1994), 'pose new challenges to the established, cultural, economic and political orders'. They are purposeful; organised groups determined to work toward a common objective. Their primary aims are to create or resist change as well as provide a political voice to those otherwise disenfranchised. Therefore, this means that they do not primarily focus on specific groups within a society but rather are issue-based movements. Whoever shares the similar grievances and are marginalised, may work together and take action to resist the state by specifically challenging the issues that are desperately affecting their lives (Dalton, et al., 1990). However, such groups are different from the traditional political organisations or interest groups (or old social movements) in that they principally put an emphasis on the consumption instead of production (Hellman, 1992). Interestingly, the new social movements in Western democracies predominantly signify the post-industrial irregularities, while those in Latin America mainly focus on material demands. The new social movements, both in Western Europe and Latin America, have no formal structures, unlike the old social movements. Thus, people of all works, regardless of their economic status, gender or class will have the same access and equal voice under the umbrella of new social movements. However, the new social movements do not stand to particularly challenge the very existence of the political parties, though their primary motives are to put forward their mistrust in the political structures or institutions, the business community and the people in power by showing their disobedience. According to Hellman (1992), the development of NSMs in Western Europe (particularly Germany, Italy, and France) became noticeable during the time the formal organisation (i.e. parties and unions) of the Left were expanding the influence both in reach and size. Their emergence though, he adds, was not to substitute the traditional political systems in place but rather to create *extra* 'political space' for citizens, while addressing the 'everyday issues' affecting poor people and forcing authorities to accept the the need reforms. In contrast, Melucci (1996) identified the efforts and creativities of new social movements are more geared towards the organisation of their vast memberships

without careful considerations of the aims they pursue. New social movements, however, provide their members (who are predominantly youth) a new meaning to self-identify around a cause, be it liberty, poverty reduction, political participation or democratic governance (Moussa, 2013). Many proponents of the new social movements are concerned about the structural changes characteristic of postmodern society while resisting politics of the time and exploring new approaches to reach the public and address their troubled dilemmas. (Laraha, et al., 1997; Dalton, et al.,(1990).

The element of social identity is a defining feature of the new social movements. The successful citizen-driven movements have united the actions of their members, while accommodating the diversity and the needs of their positions. As Veltmeyer (1997) highlights movements led by women in different parts of the world, particularly in Latin America, showed a grreat deal of success because their localise experiences as women were translated into forms of self-awareness to self-identify themselves as women. Therefore their collectively-shared experience of gender discrimination (and oppression) witnessed in different spheres of their lives - the family, the workplace, and in the public sphere of politics- united them so firmly that helped them struggle for common cause. Likewise, indigenous peoples throughout Latin America fought the same way to express their cultural and national identity. However, the communication means of new social movements at present is shaped by the emergence of new digital technology (such as Twitter and Facebook), though they are of recent. Such platforms relatively cheap means and a 'thing' for young generations in most Third World countries use which provide them a voice to express their shared views and generate their fight. In their seminal article, *Global Social Movements*, Cohen & Rai (2001) claim that youth employ the new-media for strategic and creative manner by moving local struggles to global battles. Although young participants dominate the vast membership of new social movements, it is not easy to sum up that youth in this category can be labelled as poor people; however, they may have more demands in terms of creating more political and economic space.

Another key distinctive feature of new social movements, unlike old social movements, is that they express a strong form of resistance while accommodating the heterogeneity of the positions, values and demands of the vast membership. According to Scipes (1992), the members of new social movements struggle to win over their day to day survival, however they demand for a greater political, social and economic space and participation. In this context, Laclau & Mouffe, (1985) claims that the demand for cultural, political and social transformation, characteristic of class-based movements, was shifted into demands for democracy, for more equal rights and voice within which to project their common action, which in turn was transmuted into more particular demands to accommodate the instant needs of and address the concerns of people in their communities. In this process resistance no longer took the form of explosive encounters with the guardians of the existing order or vast mobilisations for

transformation. It took the form of a day-to-day struggle for survival - to control the conditions of their particular situations (Laraha, et al., 1994, Van Male & d'Anjou, 1998, Edwards, 2004).

IV: The Role of New Social Movements in Defending Poor People's Interests

I strongly agree with the above statement that new social movements (NSMs) defend poor people's interests. To prove this statement, however, I will examine two significant cases in different contexts, Latin America and the Arab world. It is easier though to identify the differences and the similarities between the new social movements in these two different contexts, which unlike the Western world, are mostly ruled by authoritarian or less democratic regimes. Most importantly, the new social movements in these two continents (particularly Latin America) arise, as argued by Hellman (1992), where 'the Left has been suppressed, precisely *because* it has been suppressed'. The new social movements in Western capitalism is different from the above contexts due to the conflicting roles of the states. As recognised by Slater (1991) the fundamental differences lie with the question of state penetration of civil society, welfare functions of the state, the degree of acute centralisation of state power, particularly regarding the organisation of public administration, in the different contexts. In his paper, *New Social Movements and Old Political Questions*, Slater (1991) highlight the fact that the ideas of many of the new political theorists working in the Western world do not hold importance for the social and political realities of the communities in the Third World (like Latin America and the Arab world). Contrary to this fact, Laclau & Mouffe(1985) argues that the ideas are relevant to this context, but the difference lies with the degree of industrial development in both contexts.

Consider the case of a Mexican peasant's rebellion in Chiapas State against the rise of neoliberalism. The case is a clear testimony that new social movements defend poor people's interests. When Mexico signed North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on January 1, 1994, Zapatista army went public declaring that 'the agreement was so out of touch with the will of the people'. Members of Zapatista which have predominately been peasants felt that NAFTA harms their economies exposing them to trade competition and further widening the gap between rich and poor people in Chiapas- a prediction which became true (Bouillon, et al., 1999). As such, the peasants' resistance against the state became commonplace because the cause of their confrontation was deeply rooted with their relations to the means of production and the State. However, the circumstances that inspired the Chiapas violent resistance, according to Veltmeyer(1997), were deeply rooted the oppression and exploitation caused by the classes that was created within the social and cultural settings. As in Chiapas, most of the struggles was shaped by aggressive rebellion of which protesters invaded government buildings, blocked highways and finally occupied almost the entire agricultural lands. Most of the uprising inspired by discussion based on political and social ideologies which has nothing to do with the traditional

parties or unions. Though they preferred to discuss openly with the representatives of the State or to coordinate activity (such as strikes, or support for legislation) with unions, NGOs or political parties; they were cautious to keep control of the pace and the course of the principal form of struggle - massive mobilisations and direct action. In a sense, this new social movements represented the peasants and their needs, and as such strengthened the idea of participatory democracy 'by limiting public servants' terms to only two weeks, not using visible organization leaders, and constantly referring to the people they are governing for major decisions, strategies, and conceptual vision (Veltmeyer, 1997).'

As evidenced in the above example, the peasant communities in Mexico proved that they are a fundamental part of the economic and cultural basis of the country's indigenous people, which are very much a part of the national as well as the international economy. This is the very reason, according to Slater (1991), why the leaders of Zapatista rebellion could have labelled NAFTA as 'a death sentence' for the indigenous Chiapas people in particular and Mexican people at large. However, the revolution and the following process of discussions — and its shift from an armed national front into a more democratic political advocated - make it just as clear that there is an important 'political' aspect to the relationship that the country's indigenous peoples have with Mexican society (Hellman, 1992). One of the key questions in the continued discussions is exactly the need to primarily change the constitutionally defined political relationship of the country's indigenous peoples to the government and to the state - to accommodate the Zapatista movement's aims for 'liberty, independence, and democracy - and social justice' (Bouillon, et al., 1999).

On the other hand, the Arab Spring which began in Tunisia in the January 2010 and spread to the rest of Arab world, most notably in Egypt, is an excellent example of how the new social movements were engineered to promote the interests and needs of poor people in the Middle East. According to Hunter (2013), the primary aims of the new social movements supporters was to 'create more participatory and representative political systems, a fairer economic system, and independent judiciaries'. As was evidenced later in the Arab Spring, the members of the movements were predominantly poor population who yearned for "Bread, Freedom and Social Justice" which definitely inspired them to come out to the streets in millions to express their prolonged resentment against cultural, political and economic order based on policies of neglect, oppression and exclusion. This order has prevailed in its domination through means of political suppression and security force at the national level (AbdelRahman, 2016). However, the heart of the Arab uprising lies with the dissatisfaction of a vast majority of poor but educated youth in their tyrannical regimes, which have economically and politically been marginalised for an extended period. In the words of (Hassan I, et al., (2016), "the young generation peacefully rose up against oppressive authoritarianism to secure a more democratic political system and a brighter economic future". While many scholars may not agree with this notion claiming that

the Arab Spring was triggered by a multitude of combined factors, such as lack of political participation and human right violations;   however, the chief reason remains that such movement was kicked off to uproot the extreme poverty and mass unemployment within the youth population who felt it was the right time to take action, reform the regimes and ultimately reach economic prosperity (Beck & Hüser, 2010). Interesting about the new social movements in the Arab world was their use of social media in the political realm which gestured the first move in collective action within Arab countries although it was a recent technological phenomenon. For instance, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube were among the communication tools commonly employed by youth, women and political activists during the Arab uprising, many others pre-date them and are still widely used by activists, including blogs, email lists, forums and instant messaging platforms. These communications platforms have, indeed, played a critical role in promoting the public discussions in a relatively economic manner while avoiding the aggressive and volatile assemblies in the national squares. According to Moussa (2013), Egypt is a living example of how social or online media reshaped the political and social discourse while uniting the voices and demands of vast population who suffered widely under the authoritarian Hosni Mubarak regimen, which ultimately resulted in the success of the well-known January 25 uprising. Though the new social movements achieved remarkable success at the beginning, particularly in Tunisia, and hopes to recreate Arab society based on the liberal values was high, yet demands of new social movements were rarely met by the regimes. Beck & Hüser (2010) agrees with, Hunter (2013), who holds the view that the Arab authoritarian institutions and rules were not reformed as demanded by the protesters and did not result in the 'eestablishment of the institutions and practices conducive to greater democracy, better economic management, or fair and independent judiciaries'.

Looking at it from a different angle, a new social movement sometimes fail to address the demands of the poor people because the participants of the new social movements are drawn exclusively from the poor background without considering other the critical segments of the society. In fact, society, particularly a global society, is diverse and no single rope can bind them all together. As such, the new social movements (NSMs) to protect not only the poor people's interests but also guard the interests of 'others', who may not have equal economic privileges. In the Western capitalist democracies, for example, the member's new social movement commonly express their widespread discontent about the feelings of personal powerlessness engendered by the satisfaction of material needs without a consistent sense of full self-realisation. In contrast, Latin American participants may well come to enjoy some greater sense of personal fulfilment as a consequence of their involvement in new social movements. However, their common fight are predominantly organised around the satisfaction of basic needs and injustices and unequal rights are prevalent within the language of 'new' social movement, and their focus on poverty reduction is not as noticeable. Bebbington (2010) argues that leaders of social movements are cautious of

painting a picture about 'poverty' as an element of identity-based grievances as these may depoliticise and divert attention from structures of inequality and exclusion.

V: Conclusion

In summary, the essay has clearly argued that new social movements (NSMs) primarily defend, as illustrated in the above cases in Mexico and Arab world, the interests of the poor people and challenge authorities on behalf of people whose needs and demands are not addressed (Van Male & d'Anjou, 1998). The members of new social movements (NSMs) cooperatively fight against communal inequalities, the dominance of post-industrial capitalism and the welfare state. These include feminist, peace, and ecological movements, as well as the rise of pressure groups with racial motives. In his paper, New Social Movements, Habermas (1990) described such changes as an objection against the excessive size and influence of the state and its bureaucracies and their intrusion into the private worlds of individuals. The critical examples are derived from the Third World convey different realities than of the Western (developed) World which are predominately structured in classes. It is thus valid to sum up that new social movements reflect essential struggles of marginalised and vulnerable groups, poor included, who could not have otherwise expressed their plight within society than to revolt against cultural, social and political inequalities (Dalton, et al., 1990; Hellman, 1992; Mainwaring, 1987; Slater, 1991, Edwards, 2004). However, as in the words of Bebbington (2010), the new social movements 'rarely take on the mantle of "being poor" as an identity-based grievance with which to negotiate, and many movement leaders do not want to think of themselves or their bases in this way…instead, they think of their bases as people who have been denied or excluded from something, or who are being treated unjustly and inequitably either by particular actions or by institutions and policies that in their view discriminate unfairly against them.' The new social movements, he emphasises, play a vital role in the addressing the causes of poverty within the society (as rooted, fundamentally, in relationships of power).

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