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Social Movements in Theory and Practice: Concepts and Experiences from Different Regional Contexts

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The workshop organized by the University of Zürich (URPP Asia and Europe) and the University of Basel (Centre for African Studies) brought together different perspectives on social movements stemming from case studies in different regions of the world. After H.-P. Kriesi gave a broad introduction in the field of social movement theories, the other invited guests presented case studies from Phnom Pen (A. Simone), Mali (H. Magassa), Japan (K. Hasegawa), and Egypt (M. Duboc). Later case studies analyzed by younger scholars came from Guinea and Uganda, from India and South Africa, from Taiwan and Japan.

The examples were very rich in detail, full of contradictions and particularities. They challenged the conceptions of what social movements are and the dichotomies and assumptions often used when talking about them. Certain topics came up repeatedly. The first one evolved around the notion of “polite protest” that is understood as being non-confrontative in nature. The second topic touched upon the blurriness of the lines separating social movements and political parties or social movements and economic entities. Third, spaces of protest came into focus bringing up the question of when should a collective action be named a “social movement”. I will outline these points in the following.

Several case studies described collective actions as forms of “polite protests,” a term used by Duboc. These protests are non-contentious and non-confrontative both in their repertoires of contention and their major orientations and demands. Duboc analyzed how the labor movement in Egypt, for example, focused on bread-and-butter demands. In doing so the movement explicitly restricted itself to economic demands and tried to avoid more political ones, though of course this distinction is a constructed one — as we will see later. These movements fought for entitlements or rights rather than political change and framed their protest as rightful resistance within the existing political system. Consequently, when trying to get these entitlements, the actors cooperated with institutions of the state instead of contesting them fundamentally.

Hasegawa described such cooperation when talking about the environmental movement in Japan. To change consumer’s behavior, this movement focuses on educational activities and cooperates for this purpose with the ministry of environment, and this particularly at the local level. Hasegawa showed that although this movement’s orientation is directed towards change, it is still non-contentious. Showing a similar tendency, the anti-nuclear movements in Japan changed their repertoire from agitation to advocacy (Löschke). In Taiwan the “tree-hugging” movement also framed its protests in a non-contentious way, insisting mainly on the issues of tree protection and heritage conservation while in fact it was actually criticizing the decisions of the political establishment and the lack of opportunities to participate (Grano). These examples opened up the question of how contentious social movements need to be in order to still be conceptualized as such — and under which circumstances protesters chose these polite forms of protest.

Polite forms of protest blur the line between politics and economy on many levels of which three turned out to be important during the workshop. The first level concerns the demands of the movements. Kriesi noticed that whereas classical social movements (i.e. the labor movements) used to address capitalism and its representatives as their main enemies, and only later movements started to see the state as their opponent, today's movements seem to consider again that economic actors are to be contested rather than state institutions. The discussion showed that this issue has gained importance in the context of supra-national governance structures in Europe and elsewhere. These institutions decide on peoples' lives but they are neither democratically legitimate, nor accessible or accountable. Some participants argued that it has therefore become increasingly difficult for social movements to know whom to address with their demands. Others argued, however, that it is still the nation state that is primarily targeted as states are still in a position to address the movements' demands. One way for social movements to achieve their demands on the level of supra-national institutions is to back up their national governments' bargaining power in negotiations.

The second level concerns the organization of the movements. The environmental movement in Japan served once again as an example. Hasegawa analyzed how local movement groups increasingly act like small companies, producing wind energy and sun collectors. This makes the distinction between social movements and economic companies difficult. The same applies to the distinction between social movements and political parties. Kriesi noted that many of the most powerful contemporary movements are or have become political parties; as illustrated by the right-wing party movement in Europe, the party-turned Indignados, or the "tree hugging" movement in Taiwan.

The third level concerns the activists themselves. The limits between politics and economy are further blurred when doing politics becomes the activists' actual source of income as shown by the case study from Uganda and Guinea (Philipp). Similar questions were raised by examples from India, where activists faced the challenge of having to be close to politicians in order to prove fixing qualities but at the same time having to prove distance from politicians in order to maintain their trustworthiness (Lieberherr). The ambivalent role and position of elites was further illustrated by Magassa's talk on the link between the democracy movement in Mali and the education system. He argued that it is through education that elites played a central role in making democracy meaningful to people. But, in doing so, they tended to undermine the role that local knowledge could play in this endeavor.

The case study from Phnom Pen, presented by Simone, also reflected on the question of to whom should social movements address their claims. He argued that earlier urban movements turned to the government and explicitly claimed for a space in the city — amongst other reasons to have a place to be addressed back. In contrast, the Pama-group presented by Simone is in constant move and calls for the right to opacity revealing anger about their lives being hijacked by the elite. This group proved to be a very particular kind of movement — an informal network that did not address the public, but opened up a space for maneuver and for political action. The group targeted the elite by disclosing compromising information about them or about what they did. Simone described how the activists worked clandestinely, individually and did not all do the same things. But still, they cooperated with each other. This posed the question of how much collectivity is needed for an informal network to be called a social movement. The same question came up when talking about consumer boycotts, discussed in the context of Japan (Obinger). A similar but slightly different perspective was given with examples from India and South Africa where non-visible actions of micro-movements can still be regarded as vibrant "inner discursive spheres" (Sinha).

To conclude, many of the presented case studies contested dichotomies that are commonly used in the field: contentious – non-contentious, political – economic, collective – individual. Even if most of the presented case studies explored the margins of the classical social movement theories and often found them too rigid, those theories still provided many interesting approaches to study very different cases of protest.

Silva Lieberherr

Third Conference on Bengal Related Studies for Students and Young Scholars

Halle (Saale), 24.–26. October 2014

The South Asia Seminar of the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, in association with the Arbeitskreis Neuzeitliches Südasiens of the DGA and Bengal Link e. V., organized the Conference on Bengal Related Studies for Students and Young Scholars, taking place from Friday, October 24 to Sunday, October 26, 2014. This was the third conference of its kind since its conception in October 2010. The aim was to provide an interdisciplinary exchange of ideas for students and young scholars as well as to bring the current state of scholarly research on the Bengal region into limelight.

The conference's focus on Bengal as a geographical space was equally divided between the Indian union state West Bengal and Bangladesh. The conference papers and topics also suitably corresponded to different aspects of these two geographic entities. Today, Martin Luther University's initiative to maintain the spotlight on Bengal as a region worth studying is one among very few European universities. Besides sharing their research ideas with other young scholars, networking among conference participants was also among the major motives of the conference. The introductory evening of the conference started off with what the organizers termed as "academic speed dating." This mandatory interaction between the scholars helped to shake off the initial inhibition and hence facilitate exchange.

The next two days were involved in lively discussions between scholars both in and out of the conference premises. The disciplinary backgrounds and hence the conference papers of the participants were as diverse as environmental geography, film studies, gender studies, history, literary studies, social anthropology, South Asian studies, and religious studies. They came from within as well as outside of Germany, with their academic expertise ranging from masters, doctoral to post-doctoral level.

The first session of the conference was on urban culture and identity, with speakers Rahul Parson (University of Erfurt), Robert Kegler (Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg) and Sadiq Rahman (University of Hamburg) focusing on its different aspects. Rahul Parson's paper discussed the literary contribution of Calcutta-based Marwari women writers in the development of modern Hindi and how the issues of ethnic identity, class and gender were manifested in their works. Football in Calcutta and its contribution to strengthening identity in urban Calcutta was the central idea of the paper presented by Robert Kegler. Sadiq Rahman talked about the contribution of Bengal and Bengalis to Indian cinema from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century — something which has been overlooked so far in the field of film studies.

The second session of the conference was about gender perspectives in literature in colonial Bengal. Tinni Goswami Bhattacharya's (St. Xavier's College, Calcutta) paper examined the concept of infertility and its literary manifestation in the vernacular texts in colonial period.