

LATIN AMERICA STUDIES

Willem Assies, Gerrit Burgwal, Ton Salman

**Structures of Power, Movements of
Resistance**

An Introduction to the Theories of Urban
Movements in Latin America



55

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FOREWORD

by David Slater

One of the focal points of much debate within the literature on contemporary social and political theory concerns the significance of social movements, and in particular what have come to be termed 'new social movements'. It can be argued that there are three main reasons for the continuing centrality of this theme.

1. Initially, it is important to underline the steady development of interest in agency and subjectivity. In the wake of a growing disillusionment and opposition to the apparent certitudes of class analysis, the question of the constitution of social subjects and their potential relation to collective action and political agency has become increasingly pivotal in the analysis of social change. In this analytical context, the study of movements provides a point of convergence and in some cases of crystallization for many of the theoretical and political arguments that traverse this broader territory.

2. Secondly, and in a related fashion, the controversies surrounding the potential political relevance of social movements, and especially in connection with the differential meanings of democracy, have tended to flow into and reinforce the important discussions of the state-society nexus.

3. Finally, in an era sometimes characterized by the notion of 'cynical reason', or 'the end of social criticism', and in which the precepts of neo-liberalism and possessive individualism have tended to become more hegemonic, the widespread occurrence of movements of protest, often coming to life outside the realm of established institutional practices, has engendered a sense of hope, and held open, no matter how tenuously, the possibility of another horizon. Optimism of the will has been given a new dynamic.

The studies brought together in this volume explore many of the issues that go to the heart of current debates on social movements. Despite differences of orientation and paradigmatic background there is a sense of complementarity and cross-fertilization that reflects a consistent process of exchange and cooperation. The chapter provided by Assies includes an interesting discussion of the marxian tradition, seen in relation to the evolution of ideas on movements and structures, whilst the Salman contribution offers the reader an overview of the broad panoply of approaches to the contemporary analysis of social movements. Burgwal for his part sets out a classification of the key sub-themes for any analysis of urban movements in Latin America, and this clearly-structured essay acts as an introduction and bridge to the bibliography, which will be very useful for student and practitioner alike.

In all cases the range of literature covered is impressive, and, throughout the various surveys, the argument remains tightly textured, leaving no space for vague speculation. All three authors have carried out field research in Latin America, and have been able to combine the differential experiences, including a stimulating reconnaissance of the theoretical literature produced in this part of the periphery, with a firmly-rooted knowledge of the First World traditions of social theory. In this sense, and this is perhaps the most fascinating and fruitful feature of their enterprise, they are able to cross over the customary boundaries of demarcation, carrying across from periphery to centre and back, ideas, concepts, modes of reflection and points of analytical tension that help to broaden our perspective and understanding.

Finally, the texts assembled here offer a challenge. In a period within which the previously solidified blocks of critical thought have increasingly broken up, coming to resemble archipelagoes of knowledge and interpretation, to what extent can a focus on social movements and democracy help reconstruct an alternative paradigm? No longer inside the fortress of historical materialism, but outside on an open terrain where the development of an alternative problematic does not have to succumb to the cynicism of the intellect nor to the waning of social criticism; and where new horizons have to be made rather than assumed. Certainly, if it is judged necessary to expand and eventually transform the space for democratic politics, the threatening structural imperatives of the capitalist order cannot be justifiably ignored, but nor can people be treated as the mere bearers of economically produced roles. The ghost of old paradigms will no doubt continue to haunt the terrain. However, as the analytical embodiment of new ideas and visions takes a stronger hold, there is every reason to be positive; also too there is every reason to combine intellectual commitment with an invigorating social engagement, a notable hallmark of the text that follows.

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"Mr. Judge, Eviction is Injustice" (Recife, 1988/photo: Willem Assies)

INTRODUCTION

Willem Assies, Gerrit Burgwal, Ton Salman

In 1973 Manuel Castells wrote a short book containing case studies of resistance against renovation projects in Paris, municipal politics in Montreal, ecological protest in the United States and the squatter movement in Chile, it was published under the title *Urban Struggles and Political Power*. A year later, a Spanish edition came out, this time entitled *Urban Social Movements*. This is but one indication of how, over the past 15 years or so, the notion of 'social movement' has acquired a life of its own. Whereas before that time one would only occasionally come across the term, it now began to appear on the covers of books and in the title of an increasing number of articles. 'Social Movements' soon became an object of study in its own right which it was fashionable to study. The term came to be applied to a wide range of phenomena: one has only to think of ecologists, feminists, squatters, ecclesiastical base communities, students, pacifists, punkers, ethnic movements and 'wanna-be-tribes'..... The modes of action are as varied as the types of movements. They range from petitioning state agencies, through self help, communal ways of living, mass demonstrations and invasions of urban or rural property, to the burning of delayed buses or metro trains in the Brazilian metropolises. Furthermore, the conditions under which various movements emergence are different in many aspects. What do squatters in the Netherlands and in Latin America have in common? Finally, a wide range of concepts has come to be applied in the analysis of 'social movements' and opinions, of course, differ on the very definition of 'social movement'.

In an attempt to survey the literature on urban social movements in Latin America, Gerrit Burgwal found over 500 titles of articles, books, congress papers and other research reports. This alone is enough to lose sight of the wood for the trees. That was exactly the problem Ton Salman and Willem Assies were confronted with when starting their respective research projects on urban movements in Chile and Brazil. Their attempts to find a way through the jungle of the 'social movement' literature gave rise to the first two chapters of this volume which provide the reader with guidelines to the sometimes chaotic debates and the tangle of concepts. The objective is a critical evaluation of the course which the debates on (urban) social movements have taken so far and to stimulate further discussion and, above all, research.

Castell's book fell in with the spirit of the time. The opening phrases read: "Suddenly the regular drone of urban traffic is interrupted by a confused agitation of footsteps, voices, screams, sounds of metal and

breaking glass. The stream of cars comes to a halt; concentrations of pedestrians take over; the mass in movement grows, carrying banners and cardboard posters speaking of themselves. And of their city. Facing them, the eternal helmets, the order of the truncheon; steps in pace and then the charge, the violence, the repulsion" (our translation).

The spirit of '68, when the slogan *sous les pavés, c'est la plage* had expressed the feeling that a different world was within reach, was still in the air. In another way too the book reflects the spirit of the time, particularly through the original title *Luttes Urbaines et Pouvoir Politique*. It refers to the structuralist marxism which, at the time, was at the height of its influence, in part perhaps because it explained that the revolution of '68 had only failed as a result of its belief in spontaneity and a lack of articulation with the working class. In any case, the influence of structuralism in the debates on 'social movements' was pervasive. One of the issues at the time was the question of how the newly emerging conflicts related, or should be related, to the class struggle. Among feminists the debate raged over the structural articulations between patriarchy and capitalism from which it was thought possible to deduce an answer to the question of the relationship between feminism and socialism. Marxist urban sociologists engaged in robust debates about the relationship between urban movements and the class struggle.

In the latter case, some of the more influential theorists agreed on some points. Urban movements were thought of as reflecting urban contradictions. The trend-setting authors on the subject also agreed that urban social movements did not emerge spontaneously, but were the result of action by an organization upon 'its' social base. Urban movements *become* social movements only in so far as they are related to the working class movement, which was supposed to be the *real* social movement within capitalist industrial society, and to its political expression, the party. Of course opinions diverged on the choice of party, but the scheme was quite clear. Society has a structure and a superstructure, the latter consisting of ideology and politics. The party represents the objective historical interests of the working class and the majority of the population, at the political level, where history is made.

It was, as Laclau and Mouffe have observed, the proliferation of social conflicts not based on class which, among other things, made this image of society and politics and the attempts at integrating the new conflicts into a class struggle, increasingly unsatisfactory. The term 'new social movements' made its appearance as a way of referring to movements that are 'not like that'. Its appearance simultaneously heralded the eclipse of what has been called 'the paradigm of the 1970s'. We entered the 1980s in search of new ways of understanding the phenomena that would not fit the familiar schemes. 'New', therefore, refers to many things. In Europe, it may refer to movements that are not like the 'old' working class movement. In Latin America it may refer to movements that are not involved in the old schemes of populist politics. In both cases it may refer to 'new ways of doing politics', new 'places for doing politics' and the politization of new issues. 'New', simultaneously refers to new conceptualiza-

tions of social movements and the world in which they move. Such is the vast array of concepts and approaches that have emerged in the course of the debate.

One of the main features of this debate, of course, is that it is related to the much wider debates on the 'crisis of the social sciences', the 'nature' and 'meaning' of society and the question of how 'history is made', to mention just a few of the controversial issues. Such questions particularly came to the fore through the critique of the structuralism which informed much of the 'paradigm of the 1970s'. The notion that urban movements are the expression of urban contradictions left many with a feeling of unease. It was argued that structuralist theories may explain why, but not how, movements come into being and maintain themselves, questions, in short, that are related to the structure/actor controversy that nowadays pervades the social sciences.

To get away from the notion that individuals are merely the 'supports of structures', many have turned to a form of 'methodological individualism'. Some have looked to the North American tradition of collective action theories. Although, in the course of the 1970s, this tradition had come to pay more attention to the political aspects of collective action, many felt that it did not provide a satisfactory alternative to structuralism for screening out the meaningful character of action, its value orientations and the question of social change. Whereas the rational-choice approach coupled with the 'pluralist society' image, tends to apply the term social movement to any type of conflictive behaviour *within* a social system, Melucci (1980) has argued that the term *social movement* should be reserved for the types of conflictual behaviour that "transgress the norms that have been institutionalized in social roles, which go beyond the rules of the political system and/or which attack the structure of a society's class relations". While the strategic action-approach, as Touraine has observed, society is reduced to a perpetual unstructured flow of strategical interactions, the other actor-oriented alternatives to structuralism tend to emphasize the meaningful character of action and link the notion of social movement to ideas about emancipation and dis-alienation. These concerns are reflected in the emergence of concepts like 'identity', 'subjectivity' and the reconceptualizations of politics expressed in the slogan 'the personal is political', the inquiries into the 'micro-physics of power' and 'the revolution in daily life'. At the same time the epic image of social change which characterized so many of the early 'social-movement' studies, gave way to different evaluations.

Whereas the 'paradigm of the 1970s' quite often strongly focussed on questions of global societal change, the 1980s have seen a shift towards the individual actor and the emancipatory character of his/her involvement in a movement. If, according to the 'old view', a social movement emerged from contradictions and the action of 'an organization' on 'its' social base, the new emphasis would often be on notions like 'autonomy' and 'spontaneity' which were also said to be strongly valued by the new social movements themselves. Moreover, rather than seeking the significance of movements in their political effects, attention has now turned to so-called socio-cultural impact. Although these shifts in focus have opened up important areas for research, we argue in the first two chapters of this volume that the case may have been overstated. The new celebration of

the individual actor and his/her emancipation/disalienation has often led to an overly exclusive focus on the internal process of social movements as well as to a neglect of their interactions with the 'environment' and the changes they bring about, even if these are less spectacular than a heroic societal revolution.

Urban social movements make up one specific area of study within the broader field of social movement studies. The subject is therefore situated within the wider discussion, we have outlined above, which has also influenced the definition of the specificity of urban movements. The initial definitions of urban movements referred to 'urban contradictions', a concept which was made operational mainly through the notion of 'collective consumption', that is the goods and services needed for the reproduction of the labour force and provided, or rather not provided, by the state. Thus the definition specified the stakes involved in the urban conflicts as well as the adversary. Not surprisingly, it was pointed out after a while that the definition did not cover all urban conflicts. Although issues of collective consumption play an important role, they do not exhaust the field of urban conflictuality. In relation to Latin America, it was argued that the definition was perhaps a-critically transposed from a European context, without sufficient elaboration of the specificities of the peripheral capitalist state. Further objections have been raised against the idea that movements 'mechanically' reflect contradictions. Structures do not practice by themselves. The concept of urban contradiction as a defining characteristic of *urban* movements has been a bone of contention in such controversies. We do not feel that these differences can be resolved by adding to the list yet another definition of *urban* (social) movements, or, for example, by substituting the notion of 'urban issues' for 'urban contradictions'. There will always be borderline cases. In the first two chapters of this book various approaches to -and definitions of- urban social movements will be discussed in the context of the wider debate on social movements. In the introduction to the bibliography the theoretically informed criteria for inclusion/exclusion, which in the end involve pragmatic consideration, will be elucidated.

In a similar way as the concept of urban contradictions relates to the structure/actor-controversy, the relation of movements to the state and their political significance are a subject of debate which cannot simply be resolved through redefinition. In broad outline one might say that in the earlier studies the issue of the relationship between urban movements and the struggle for socialism often took the centre stage, whereas in more recent studies the issue of democracy occupies an increasingly prominent place. This shift went hand in hand with a rethinking of the relation between movements and the state. Both theoretical contributions in this volume touch upon problems in this area and discuss aspects of the 'democracy issue'. Although this focus partly reflects the fact that the authors' research concentrates on urban movements in the context of the 'democratic transitions' in Chile and Brazil, we feel that the importance of the issue is not restricted to such cases.

If the themes of the structure/actor problem and the relations between movements, the state and democracy occupy a prominent place in the contributions to this book, we are well aware that these do not cover all of the themes

and controversies that mark current discussions of social movements. Given the present state of the art, in which debates can be both highly detailed, and extremely global, in which no consensus exists about the level of elementary and basic terms and conceptualizations, in which research reports cover all continents and vary from descriptive case studies to attempts at broad cross-cultural generalization, covering the entire field is no longer possible.

The limitations of this book, however, do not just stem from the need to restrict the discussion. They also embody our conviction that, in order to arrive at a critical and adaptable understanding of both the movements' manifestations as well as the social scientists' assessments of these manifestations, it might be appropriate to reflect on aspects that, logically as well as chronologically, 'precede' the current theoretical trends and research approaches. The texts presented thus do not go into much empirical detail, nor do they claim to finally resolve any theoretical or research dilemma or controversy. Moreover, they do not pretend to cover the whole gamut of perspectives, themes and theses that have been advanced. Our guideline in reflecting upon the present increase in studies on social movements has been to 'step back' and to reconsider from a somewhat greater distance the background and motivations behind, positions and explanations currently being articulated. In this manner, we felt, it would be possible to contribute to a critical evaluation of the course which the debates have taken and to establish a useful, theoretically informed, starting point for our own research. We hope that these contributions will stimulate further debate and research.

The essay by Willem Assies begins with a discussion of the 'marxist legacy' which has had, and still has, a great influence on the debate on social movements. Marxism not only claimed to be a theory of 'the' social movement of industrial capitalist society -the working class movement-, but also to provide a theory for this movement. The first section traces the discussion of the structure/actor theme as it developed within the marxian paradigm and its relation to the issue of 'consciousness' and 'ideology'. The second part of this section focusses on the debates relating movements, the party, state power and the state to each other. The next section turns to the problem of coping with movements that are not directly class based, urban movements in particular, by integrating them into the class-struggle paradigm. Three such attempts, which have had a pervasive influence on the debate on urban social movements in Latin America, are reviewed. The contributions reviewed have had a major influence in shaping the so-called 'paradigm of the 1970s', revolving around the notion of 'urban contradictions', their relation to the class struggle and the issue of state power. The third section features the debate on the so-called new social movements and shows how this debate intersects with attempts to develop 'post-marxist' approaches. These attempts were prompted by dissatisfaction with current efforts at integrating the newly emerging 'a-typical' movements into the familiar scheme and are related to the ongoing controversies over the structure/ actor problem and the conceptualization of social change. Some of the major interventions in these debates are reviewed and compared on a number of points, such as the conditions under which new social movements emerge, the relevance of class

composition for understanding such movements and the conceptualization of politics. These three sections provide background for a review of the discussion of urban movements in Latin America which follows in the fourth section of this contribution. It starts with a discussion of some of the attempts at adapting the 'paradigm of the 1970s' to Latin American circumstances and then briefly outlines some of the contributions to the development of a cross-cultural framework, that are essential if we are to avoid an a-critical transposition of theoretical approaches to different situations. It appears that one of the features most clearly shared by 'new' movements in Europe and Latin America is the problematization of their relation to 'politics'. However, on this point too, the issue presents itself in different ways, if only because in the Latin-American circumstances the functioning of a liberal democratic system cannot be presupposed as easily as in Europe. Issues like 'autonomy' and 'non-institutionalization' have different connotations in the context of the so-called 'democratic transitions' which are really processes of reorganization involving the creation of channels of 'participation'. This leads to a brief review of some of the current debates on the 'democratic potential' of Latin American urban movements and to a plea for a more sober and balanced approach. Finally it is argued that, although the emancipatory impact of the movements and their role in societal changes may have been overestimated in the early studies, there is no reason for discarding these features as defining characteristics of social movements. If it is true that the conceptions of change have taken leave of the 'old' model of cataclysmic revolution, it remains useful and worthwhile to retain the references to emancipation and change, rather than adopting seemingly neutral, relativist definitions covering a wide range of different forms and types of 'collective action'.

The essay by Ton Salman takes a comparative perspective. It starts with the observation that an important as well as problematical, feature of attempts to account for the meaning of social movements is the idea -or the wish- that they should be the subjects of significant social change, particularly now that such movements seem to be proliferating throughout the world. This becomes the starting point for a discussion of two controversial issues that seem to dominate the terrain, after a brief outline of the legacy of some of the 'older' traditions in the study of social movements. The first issue is one which -when simplified- divides researchers who focus on structural conditions and constraints as bases of explanation, and researchers who claim that the actual political conflicts should be our main focus of interest; some even arguing that these conflicts *constitute* the political identities and the interests at stake and that, therefore, reference to 'underlying' structural features is irrelevant for an assessment of the significance of the conflict. The argument in this section takes Laclau & Mouffe's contribution to a 'post marxist' paradigm for explaining political conflict as its guideline. It discusses their critique of 'economistic marxism' and then turns to an evaluation of their choice of discourse analysis as an alternative. It concludes with a critique of their overly radical plea for acknowledging the *contingent* aspects of political conflict and contestation and their tendency to screen out the extra-discursive and contextual features in the explanation of political mobilization.

The second issue addressed has come to the fore particularly in the debates on the 'new' social movements. Here, authors who state that the main characteristics of the movements lie in their potential for *socio-cultural* transformation are opposed by others who focus on the *political* interaction and impact. It is argued that such a dichotomization does not do justice to the continuities between the two dimensions. In order to clarify these continuities and yet not be forced into undifferentiated statements about 'obvious mutual impacts', a number of important research questions crop up. The present state of the art concerning this theme invites reflection on such questions as the learning processes which participants in movements go through, the competencies that might result from these learning processes and the consequences they might have for political outlooks and activities as well as for attitudes towards 'outside' intervention. For example, the glorification of 'autonomy' at the level of demand-making and of interaction with political institutions has hardly been examined by researchers and this has prevented a critical evaluation of the consequences of the emphasis on autonomy. Similarly, the theme of institutionalization has remained underdeveloped as a result of a rather rigid counterpositioning of institutionalization and identity. According to some authors the movements face the dilemma of either yielding to the 'weight of reality' and becoming integrated into the established dominant framework or preserving their identity at the price of being ineffective. It seems a fruitful hypothesis that at some time or other, movements are confronted with the challenge of institutionalization and to examine the ways in which movements manage to influence and transform the terms of institutionalization.

Also in this section, a plea is made to take account of the *crucial* impact which contextual features exert on the character, development, 'weight' and internal transitions that mark the movements. In the final section some considerations of conceptual differentiation, of the 'newness' of new social movements and of the focus on democracy that marks many of the present Latin American attempts to reflect upon (urban) social movements, are presented in the hope that they will be helpful for future research.

In the third chapter -a short introduction to the bibliography- a concise overview of thematical points of interest in recent publications and research reports on urban movements in Latin America is presented. These themes have served as guidelines for indexing the literature included in the bibliography. This index, and the accompanying user's guide, should help the readers locate literature in which they have a special interest. Inevitably, such a bibliography will be outdated by the time of publication. However, up to the beginning of 1989, it includes all the publications on the subject of urban social movements in Latin America that are known to us.

As explained in the introduction to the bibliography, movements clearly characterized by other than urban issues are not included in our list. For instance, labour movements and organizations, as well as movements and organizations set up on the basis of peasant interests, women's issues or of an ethnic or guerrilla character are left out, as well as movements associated with other forms mobilization in Latin America. To be sure, there are no clear-cut,

once and for all criteria for exclusion or inclusion. Our choices have been informed by considerations of relevance and theoretically informed pragmatism. The focus on urban movements not only has to do with the research projects in which we are involved but also with the fact that in recent decades, this type of organization has spread to such an extent that its possible role and meaning for political and social developments in Latin America in the near future merits special study. Surely, posing the question does not mean giving a positive answer: both skeptical as well as exultant assessments have been presented, backed up by what appears to be convincing empirical data. Rather than finding this disheartening however, we find these differences stimulating and challenging. We hope to have both expressed and passed on this feeling in the present volume.