

Movements and the Left

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Across the years, various social movements were born, tackling issues and areas such as poverty and work. During the 1960s and the 1970s, new voices were heard in various societies, dealing with issues such as peace, environment, gender equality, anti-racism, sexual orientation and civil rights. Various new social movements were born to express these voices.

During the past few years significant developments took place with regard to the politics of social movements. Various movements became active on a global level. In previous years there already were some movements which worked in such a way – Greenpeace and Amnesty International are two notable examples.

Global cooperation among movements has become widespread. One need only mention the wide alliance of movements and activists in 1999 during the anti-World Trade Organisation protests at Seattle. As we entered a new millennium, the World Social Forum was also born, uniting various movements and activists who believe that another world is possible.

Such cooperation is also found within blocs such as the European Union, where both ‘new’ and ‘old’ social movements (e.g. ecological and trade unions, respectively) are active across borders.

There are various reasons to explain the global spread of social movements. These include the following:

1. The expansion of global neo-liberalism, which has left various ‘casualties’ in terms of poverty, social exclusion, environmental destruction and other injustices;
2. The rise of identity politics – based on issues and areas such as peace, ecology, gender, anti-racism, sexual orientation and civil rights;
3. The lack of support towards discourse in favour of global justice on the part of traditional mainstream political parties, including those on the Left. This has created space for a ‘new’ Left – that of social movements and political parties such as the Greens;
4. Technological development in information and communications – making it much easier for global networking and communication between social movements.

Social Movements are facing various strategic choices. I believe that their role is related to that of the political left. I am obviously excluding movements such as racist, homophobic and fundamentalist movements from the equation.

Is it possible that social movements form alliances which go beyond their particularistic interests? Is it possible to form new hegemonies with mass political parties, based on democracy, social justice and other concepts?

How can new social movements help form hegemonic synthesis between their strategies and dominant ideologies such as consumerism?

How can visions of global justice be synthesized with national and local realities?

The choices are difficult, yet one thing is certain. If social movements make use of discourse which is alien to the expectations of people (with all their class, gender, identity, ethnic and other differences), there is little hope for change. The same will happen if movements fail to realize that other voices exist in societies. In such cases, social movements will be no more than political hermits.

In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that unfortunately, the political Right has managed to win the minds and hearts of people through its political populism.

Therefore, the challenge ahead is to include the particularistic claims of social movements within a hegemonic Left.

The particularistic can become 'universalised' through ideology, discourse and political strategy that unites and gives due importance to the various identities and claims. This would undoubtedly involve some form of compromise, yet this would also mean that synthesis could be formed – ultimately resulting in hegemony if successful.

Hegemony is not absolute and eternal. There will always be some form of political antagonism. Yet, this is politics.

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