Seminar description

Seminar Discourse, social movements and networks. 
Presentation and discussion

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This seminar was organised by Adil Moustaoui and Luisa Martín Rojo. The following people contributed papers to it:

Mohamed Abidi, Miguel Alfonso Bouhaben, Camila Cárdenas Neira, Antoni Castel Tremosa, Óscar García Agustín, Janice Alves Gomes y Luiza Helena Oliveira da Silva, Irkus Larrinaga, Esperanza Morales, Víctor Pérez Béjar, Viviane de Melo Resende y Rosimeire Barboza Silva, Manuela Romano, Jan Zienkowski.

The text by Manuela Romano is representative of some of the issues addressed during the seminar.1

Discussion

I spent most of my discussant slot talking about two key constructs arising in the panel papers: power and, of course, social movements. The following is roughly what I had to say.2

Power

One term that comes up in discussions of social movements is the role of power, and for this we need a theory of power. Antonio Gramsci (1971: 57–8) conceived of power in terms of hegemony, seeing the latter as operative at the nation-state level via two routes: (1) via ‘domination’, that is, the threat or actual use of physical force, what Machiavelli would have called ‘coercion’, and (2) via ‘intellectual and moral leadership’, the seduction or winning over of potentially antagonistic groups, what Machiavelli would have called ‘consent’. Or, as Manuel Castells puts it, power ‘is exercised by means of coercion (the monopoly of violence, legitimate or not, by the control of the state) and/or by the construction of meaning in people’s minds, through mechanism of symbolic manipulation (Castells, 2012: 5).

If Gramscian view of power is linked to the nature and working of the governing class in societies with links to notions of ideology as all-encompassing knowledge structures which serve established power as they shape activity, thought and behaviour on the ground, Michel Foucault (1977) is associated with a quite different view. For Foucault power permeates a wided range of is notions, as us-united of state as well as the most localised grouping and activities of ideals and collectives. Or put another way, that it is distributed across a range of material and discourse
("regimes of truth") while at the aim time being embodied in the most teatime way in individuals.

Taking on board the Gamscian power based in dominant ideology and Foucault’s notion of power as pervading all activity, Castells proposes the examination of ‘networks of power’ as part of his interest in the ‘network society’ as the society of late 20th and early 21st century which is mediated, as never before, by wide range of interconnected communications technologies and forms of information processing, leading to ever-greater economic, social, cultural and politician interdependence among nation-states (also known as globalization). Networks of power are state operated (in the interests of economic power) and interrelated. Examples include the military and police as powers of repression and control (officially sanctioned violence potentially and in practice) who are connected to those who control the means of production and financialization, who are connected to those who control information (the official media) and so on.

Castells poses the question: ‘Who holds power in the network society?’ He suggests that first of all there are programmers who have ‘the capacity to program each one of the main networks on which people’s lives depend (government, parliament, the military and security establishment, finance, media, science and technology institutions, etc.)’ (Castells, 2012: 8). Second, there are the ‘switchers’, those ‘who operate the connections between different networks (media moguls introduced in the political class, financial elites bankrolling political elites, political elites bailing out financial institutions, media corporations intertwined with financial corporations, academic institutions financed by big business, etc.)’ (Castells, 2012: 8-9).

Castells proposes an additional concept, counterpower, as the ‘the deliberate attempt to change power relations, [which] is enacted by reprogramming networks around alternative interests and values, and/or disrupting the dominant switches while switching networks of resistance and social change … by using mechanisms of power-making that correspond to the forms and processes of power in the network society’ (Castells, 2012: 9).

So where does all of this lead?

**Social movements**

For Manuel Castells, historically there are four general causes of social movements over time and space. First, and perhaps foremost, is poverty, especially when it becomes so obvious and brutal that it cannot be assumed by the poor. Second, there is economic exploitation, again especially when
it becomes so obvious and brutal that it cannot be assumed by the exploited.

Third, there is unfair treatment of difference which usually comes in the form of racism, homophobia, religious intolerance and so on: in short, the denial of ‘recognition’, which Nancy Fraser (2008: 131) argues is ‘essential to the development of a sense of self … [as t]o be denied recognition – or to be “misrecognized” – is to suffer both a distortion of one’s relation to one’s self and an injury to one’s identity.’ (Fraser, 2008: 131). Fourth, and finally, there is the specific activity of power groups, such as police the police (e.g. police brutality) and big corporations (environmental pollution), especially when events take on a certain notoriety in society, becoming scandals and eventually the targets of social movements.

For Castells (2012: 219), ‘social movements are most often triggered by emotions derived from some meaningful event that help the protesters to overcome fear an challenge the powers that be in spite of the danger inherent to their action’. Two key emotions motivating the formation of social movements are anger and outrage, as we see in the term indigando/as. However, it is interesting to observe how in the evolution of social movements, anger and outrage cease to be the exclusive emotion as a kind of enthusiasm and strong sense of togetherness and belonging come to the fore once a movement has jelled.

Indignation and anger arise from the lived realities, the material conditions which lead to the genesis of social movements to combat inequality and injustice. However, there is also a non-material discursive dimension to consider. It is not just losing one’s home which provokes/causes indignation and anger. Nor is it the physical violence of the police who must forcibly remove someone from their home or combat them when they participate in a street protest. Rather there is what Bourdieu long ago termed ‘symbolic violence’, capturing how ‘the different cl In Spain at present, one could argue there are elements of all four of Castells’s four causes at work. There has no doubt been an increase in poverty and the ever-clearer exploitation of those who work. There are recognition issues as well, around a renationalisation of the Spanish state, especially with regard to the sovereignty issue in Catalonia. And finally, there are the actions of the state, which may be understood in terms of both physical and symbolic violence. The economic crisis has marked in the most primitive way the end of an era and above all the end of an illusion (Callinicos, 2010; Duménil & Levy, 2011). This illusion was that the model of income distribution dominant in recent decades would allow all social classes, or all sectors of the population, to increase their revenue. In Spain, the decade 1998-2008 was a period of time in which a large proportion of the population came to believe that they were richer than they had ever been, and this was apparently the case given the amount of money that was circulating in
Spanish economy in the first eight years of this century. However, as we now know, this increase in money resulted not from a rise in salaries but in an increase in money obtained via the liberalization of access to credit. Indeed salaries hardly increased and in real terms they decreased in some sectors. By contrast, credit was available as it had never been before and 100+% mortgages, while not the norm, were available in some cases. Once the crisis had brought people down to earth, there was a collective realisation that the growth model that far too many had followed without question was an illusion, a mirage of prosperity, and that the time had come to deal with the cadavers, real and metaphorical, that it left in its wake.

Meanwhile, in the general population there has been a growing sense of alienation from a political class which has adopted policies which benefit just 1% of the population. The clearest and most notorious consequence of the crisis is the reduction of employment, or what is the same, the tremendous increase in unemployment, which has recently hovered around six million. However, with the rise in unemployment has come a pronounced and radical attempt by the government in power to disempower the population, either to distract it with non-economic (superstructure) matters or simply to wrest away from it the legal infrastructure and physical ability to affect protest and resistance to government action. Thus, taking advantage of the economic situation, the government has embarked on a social programme clearly designed to limit the labour and social rights of citizens. In effect, on the back of a reduction in the amount of spending devoted to the distribution of income in society, a raft of repressive and anachronistic social legislation has been introduced. The latter seems designed to demoralize the population through attacks on its political, social, cultural and legal rights as citizens. There is, thus, an attack on freedom of speech via the Ley de Seguridad Ciudadana; an attack on the rights of women over their own bodies via the proposed reform of the 2010 abortion law (which since our meeting in Seville has been withdrawn); an attack on notions of equal access to a quality education (and secular education for all) via the Ley Orgánica para la Mejora de la Calidad Educativa; and so on.

**Responses to the crisis: social movements**

Against this socioeconomic and socio-political backdrop, groups of people in cities around Spain have begun to organise to defend their rights, or where these have been taken away, to claim them back (Domingo, & Marín, 2011; Feixa & Nofre, 2012, Presno Linera, 2014)). They do so in the knowledge that the state cannot and will not do anything to remedy their situation and indeed the general impression is that the current government
are constantly finding ways to confound and prevent citizens from bettering their lives (Presno Linera, 2012). To try to curb this loss of rights, desperate people have begun to react in a proactive and organised manner. For example, the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH) is a grassroots organisation which campaigns on behalf of individuals and families who because of unexpected unemployment or a sudden rise in interest rates find that they are unable to make mortgage payments and therefore are either threatened with eviction from their homes or have already suffered eviction from their homes. The PAH meets in assemblies during which information is shared about past or impending evictions and victims are provided legal, practical and emotional support. It also engages in direct action, which ranges from participation in mass demonstrations to escraches, which are focussed demonstration in which a group of activists protest outside the homes and workplaces of politicians. The latter are deemed to be law-makers who have some decision-making capacity with regard to the legislation of banks and practices such as home evictions.

It is worth noting that such movements are not proposing mass revolution as they do not put forward a highly structured and alternative social model; rather, they represent a particular grievance and demand changes in laws and the social policies and practices which derive from them (e.g. home evictions as what happens to individuals and families when they can no longer make mortgage payments to banks). Such proactive movements, therefore, emerge to deal with specific problems in society, which means that they are relatively small and primarily composed of individuals who are affected by the problem which they are committed to resolving.

**Themes and considerations**

With the former discussion in mind I ended my talk with a list of themes and considerations in the study of social movements. All of these need to be taken on board when researching social movements.

**Themes:**
- proactive or reactive or both
- central and/or peripheral
- local and/or global
- territorial or virtual or both
- level of media coverage
- degree of institutionalization
- sectoral or cross (specific problems or not)
- affirmative or transformative (reform or revolution)
Considerations:
- the distinction between activists and the affected: one can be an activist against an injustice without having been a victim of that injustice (affected), and one can be the victim of an injustice (affected) without being an activist against it
- the role of leadership in collectives which aim to be ‘horizontal’
- systemic movements (questioning the economic system) vs. more specific movements (single issue oriented)
- movements that are aimed at redistributing resources (systemic movements) and movements that target the lack of recognition / respect (the movement to eliminate discrimination by race, gender, sexuality, etc.)
- types (names): groups: movements, platforms, political parties ...
- individual trajectories - the factors that make people get involved
- movement trajectories- from the beginning until their demise
- the affective aspect of movements, from indignation and anger- as initial triggers- to feelings of affinity, belonging, joy, etc. that make people remain part of movements
- Doing research on movements that we do not like (e.g. extreme right groups)?
- the class-based composition of different movements
- the inevitable tension between vertical and horizontal structuring of groups.
- ‘discursive regimes' as structuring structures (or are they? Or can they be?)

Notes

1 Note from the editors.
2 Much of what is written here is based on a paper in preparation with my colleagues at the Universitat de Lleida: Carme Bellet, Pere Enciso and Carles Feixa.

References


Nota biográfica

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