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Networks In Movement

Social movements are a form of collective action. If we understand them like this, we will then ask how a certain number of people enter into contact, communicate with each other, and decide to act concertedly to achieve an end they have decided on, put forward demands to others using a range of forms of protest, and seek out allies. They resort to some form of organization, rudimentary, informal, and temporary as it may be. Even in large demonstrations, we see that people pick a starting and end point, carry banners and placards with the names of their organizations and their demands on them, express their determination to get what they want, and shout more or less shared slogans.

Demonstrations have the aim of reiterating to the public their demands and indicating that the demonstrators deserve what they're asking for and have enough num-

bers and power to overcome their opponents' resistance. As Charles Tilly put it, protests have the intention of consciously or unconsciously deploying performative and expressive resources that show the public and their opponents that those protesting are WUNC (worthy, united, numerous, and committed). Anti-crime marches that bring together victims of violence, whether perpetrated by organized crime or the authorities, show they are WUNC, as do the protests of the teachers' movement, whose participants are mainly government workers.

Since social movements are a form of collective action that implies a certain degree of communication and coordination by participants, the smallest unit of analysis is those who coordinate among themselves to demand that another party does or does not do something. The relations among these parties are not unidirectional, but are made up of interactions among them, and stimulate processes of co-evolution: those who participate in collective actions change reciprocally when they define reality

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and decide a course of action to influence others and as a result of the processes of change they initiate.

In contrast with this relational perspective, others attribute individuals with certain traits or essences that are expressed when they enter into contact with someone else. From structural-functionalist perspectives, roles and interests are assigned to persons and groups as a function of the place they occupy in structures. From a relational perspective (that is, one that looks at interactions), new ideas, forms of behavior, orientations, and commitments arise. This is why it is important to identify the parties that interrelate and how, when, and where they do so, as well as which regularities and novel elements arise out of that. Social movements can be seen as relationships and groups of relationships among at least three parties: those making a demand, the party they demand should act, and the public.

While it is generally agreed that social movements represent a form of collective action and that the concepts of networks and the fabric of society are appropriate for describing the links among participants, allies, and opponents, sometimes references to them are no more than metaphors. However, analyzing networks allows us to identify the nodes that interrelate, describe their links through matrices and graphs, measure their characteristics and properties, and formalize and mathematically model the relations among them.

Graphically, the links between nodes are represented with lines; the nodes may represent individuals, groups, organizations, or institutions. Depending on their number and their links, this creates a network: a system of interconnections that express stable structural and interactive relationships. The former consist of the size of the network, its density, its centrality, and the sub-groups or clusters. Nodes that are not linked to any others are of no sociological interest; they represent isolated, disconnected individuals, alien to the network we are focused on. The important ones are those that are interconnected and whose presence or absence has consequences for what

happens in the network. The interactive properties are derived from the relationships among nodes: their form, transactional content, frequency, duration, and the direction of the flows of exchange (what flows from one node to another and back), and the combination or juxtaposition of certain networks *vis-à-vis* others (for example, between a neighborhood association, a political party, or a migrant settlement).

Network analysis allows us to understand structural and interactive relationships that depend on the way nodes link up. Not all are connected in the same way and some have closer ties than others. Not all those that could be part of a network are included, which means they are useful for also understanding exclusions and describing hierarchies. Networks can be more or less open. For example, organizations in the anti-crime movement call on the support of the entire population, but those with a revolutionary orientation, whether anarchist or Marxist, demand loyalty to their ideology and political objectives.

Some Findings

Network perspective applied to the study of social movements has made it possible to note relationships, patterns, regularities, adaptation processes, learning, and co-evolution of the parties. A network perspective poses questions about who knows whom, how close they are to each other, what the degree of trust is among them, who is included and who is not, what the transactional content of the relationship is, and what impact the network's characteristics has on their origin, trajectory, and outcomes.

Network analysis makes it possible to show that the formation of the organizational fabric that fostered Mexico's transition to democracy resulted from the gradual creation of grass-roots organizations in the countryside, in unions, and in cities, which put forward demands based on the project of the Mexican Revolution but that were suppressed by an increasingly authoritarian state. With time, these organizations linked up in activist networks of civic, social, political, and institutional organizations —in the latter case, like universities and the Catholic Church—, and from there came into contact with aggrieved populations distributed nationwide. These groups of aggrieved populations and their natural leaders established relationships with professional politicians and

came to understand that to advance their material demands and conditions, the country had to become democratic. Thus, over decades, the networks of alternative trust broadened out, facilitating their cooperation and rejecting the corporatist policies of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the state.

It is well known that not all those who would benefit from the achievement of social movements' aims actually participate in them. Not all women participate in the women's movement; only some do. The same is true of others like the student, environmental, and indigenous movements, as well as the others. But why, then do some participate and others do not? The answers vary: one is that participating in the production of a collective good is irrational and that the rational course of action is to scrounge off the result of other people's efforts. So, why participate in an environmentalist movement, for example, if when it achieves its objectives nobody can prevent me from breathing less polluted air?

Now, from the network perspective, the answer is that differential participation in social movements derives from the structural proximity of certain individuals to those movements' recruiting networks, which exercise a force of attraction, and the absence of networks opposed to that movement, which generate rejection. For example, young educated women would participate in movements to legalize abortion unless they are also linked to conservative groups, religious or not. In those social movements, as well as other forms of collective action, different networks strengthen or repel other networks.

Alberto Melucci and others have also studied the role of submerged networks in defining grievances that later become public and attempt to displace dominant definitions. In any case, interaction exists among competing or complementary formal and informal networks. This shows the importance of having an open mind when discerning relationships among nodes because they allow us to understand the social structures individuals are situated in and where they come from, how they develop, and how they influence movements. Not taking into account these grid-pattern structures has led some to believe that protests are spontaneous and to minimize the importance of the pre-existing connected makeup of the community.

Knowing that one out of every four participating organizations is not grass-roots, but a group created to lend aid, accompany, or provide services or political or legal in-

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termediation, and that it has the support of international organizations and foundations reveals a great deal about the fabric of society in which protests develop in Mexico.

A network analysis allows us to observe that what social movements can achieve does not depend solely on their capabilities and power, but also on those opposed to them, and allies can make a definitive difference in this respect. The capabilities and power of social movements depend on the degree to which they are connected with other social and political actors and the support they get from them, whether these be political parties, legislative caucuses, the media, or groups that defend rights, provide strategic litigation, or promote social development. For example, if we compare the Oaxaca teachers' movement with the LGBTTTIQ+ movement, we will find similarities. Both are social movements, but we will also see big differences in their way of presenting demands, and in what they have achieved since they emerged in the late 1970s.

The central pillar of the teachers' movement is a national teachers' union local, made up of those dedicated to an activity Mexicans value very highly: education. The LGBTTTIQ+ movement has been so inclusive that it has turned into the movement of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, transvestite, intersexual, queer, and other identities (+). This means that it is a diffuse group of organizations without a central pillar similar to that of the teachers and one that seeks the recognition of the rights of a stigmatized, discriminated population. The teachers' movement has rested on periodical pressure-mobilization-negotiation cycles, centered on hikes in wages and benefits. The LGBTTTIQ+ movement has followed an agenda to ensure the dignity of its members, which has implied cultural and legislative changes.

At first glance, it would seem that the teachers' movement's aims were easier to achieve than those of the LGBTTTIQ+ movement. However, the latter has made considerable gains, while the former has not been able to leave behind its annual pressure-mobilization-negotiation cy-

cle. What explains this? There is no single cause, but the difference cannot be attributed to the number of people involved in these movements or the frequency of their protests. The difference seems to be that the LGBTTTIQ+ movement is a plural, open, inclusive, non-ideological network, allowing it to receive support from powerful allies and to combine contentious politics with lobbying. By contrast, the teachers have encountered limitations in establishing lasting alliances outside their own ranks. ◼M

Further Reading

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