

Valentina Cano

SOC1620: Globalization and Social Conflict

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**Social Movements as a Response to the Weakening of Institutional
Accountability in the Era of Globalization**

*Social movements crystallize around normatively
liberating perspectives for resolving conflicts that
had previously appeared insoluble (Habermas, 2001: 112).*

Years ago, Weber emphasized the importance of an institutional framework within the context of capitalism. Yet, globalization, enacted by networks of wealth, technology and power, is transforming our world, enhancing our productive capacity, cultural creativity, communication potential, and disenfranchising societies. Globalization thus disintegrates social control and political representation (Castells, 2010: 72). One of the consequences that arises from this transformation is the challenge towards accountability¹ within the institutions of the nation-state. With it, societal concerns are left unanswered, creating the need for countermovements as a means to express discontent, and leaving remedies to this problem, such as the enactment of a sense of global civil solidarity, up to debate. These movements stem from the same problematic, but are diverse both in their forms of manifestation and in their results.

This paper will use the human rights and the environmental movement to illustrate the following claim: The weakening of institutional accountability, that arises in the period of contemporary globalization, has generated countermovements to express social and political inconformity.

¹ Accountability is "the extent to which political actors are responsible to society for what they say and do"(Hyden, Court & Mease, 2004).

The economic transformation that overcame the world in the era of capitalism created a need to rethink the relevance of institutions², in order to provide mechanisms of accountability consistent with the demands of the people. The prominent German author Max Weber saw the construction of a solid, authoritative framework as a necessary prerequisite to the operation of markets (Evans, 1992: 146). As a tool, Weber states the pertinancy of bureaucratic institutions, given that "bureaucracy inevitably accompanies modern mass democracy (1949: 224)." Still, within this institutional schema, he recognizes the tendency of social conflict to arise; for Weber, the conditions of rationalized organization, in political and economic spheres alike, depend upon a continuous open struggle (Collins, 1980: 941). The Weberian emphasis on bureaucracy and institutionality illustrates the precursor to the establishment of a structural governance of society which, when coupled with democracy, also implies the existence of social relations.

Hence, capitalism produces a strengthening of institutions that can only be sustained if we understand the social dimensions that come with this model. Karl Polanyi stated that "man's economy, as a rule, is submerged in his social relationships (2001:48)." He famously coined the term 'satanic mill' as a description of capitalism, expressing that "no society could stand the effects of such a system of crude fictions even for the shortest stretch of time unless its human and natural substance as well as its business organization was protected against the ravages of this satanic mill (2001:76)." For Polanyi, the maintenance of social ties is crucial (2001: 48); moreover, he believes that the life of the market has been intertwined not just with other kinds of social ties, but with the forms and policies of the State³ (Evans, 1992: 146). Yet, even if we claim

² Institutions are the "set of patterned interactions governed by norms and sometimes inscribed in enforceable rules that ensure with a certain predictability that people will behave in a certain manner" (Handout Week 5).

³ The State is "the continuous administrative, legal, bureaucratic and coercive systems that attempt not only to structure relationships between civil society and public authority in a polity but also to structure many crucial relationships within civil society itself. States have differentiated institutions, are characterized by a form of power that is centralized in the sense that it radiates outwards from the center, cover territorially demarcated areas, exercise authoritative binding rule-making, and have a monopoly over the means of organized violence (Handout Week 5)."

we understand both the institutional and social dimensions that come with capitalism, the phenomenon of globalization that abounds the world nowadays has reconstructed them.

The combination of factors that enabled institutions within the structure of the nation-state to achieve a sense of power has been utterly challenged and weakened by globalization. As Jurgen Habermas expresses, "the phenomena of the territorial state, the nation and a popular economy constituted with national borders formed a historical constellation in which the democratic process assumes a more or less convincing institutional form [...] Today, developments summarized under the term 'globalization' have put this entire constellation into question (2001: 60)." On a similar note, Manuel Castells explains how "power is no longer concentrated in institutions, but diffused in global networks of wealth, power, information and images (2010: 424)," creating a powerless nation state (2010: 358). Accompanied by this loss of power, a new problematic arises: the withering of mechanisms of institutional accountability.

To be able to align with the populace's interests, the capacity of institutions to be held accountable to their functions is of crucial importance; nonetheless, globalized power diminishes structures of accountability, which are also tied to state sovereignty. Castells describes the way in which the modern nation-state, bypassed by global networks, has lost much of its sovereignty. In the same way, by trying to intervene strategically in the global scene, the state loses its capacity to represent its territorially rooted constituencies (2010: 419). For "if state sovereignty is no longer conceived as indivisible but shared with international agencies; if states no longer have control over their national territories; and if territorial and political boundaries are increasingly permeable, the core principles of democratic liberty are made distinctly problematic (Habermas, 2001: 61)." Although for Huber, Rueschemeyer & Stephens, in practice, many democracies have survived without achieving full consolidation, they explain how accountability is often weak

because of overpowering presidents and weak legislatures and judiciaries (1997: 330). Castells has even characterized the institutions and organizations of civil society⁴, that were constructed around the democratic state and around the social contract between capital and labor, as 'empty shells,' given that they are decreasingly able to relate to people's lives and value in most societies (2010: 420). This is a very relevant debate given that, according to Evans, the recognition of the importance of state capacity, in the sense of an institutional structure that is durable and effective, is characteristic of a new wave of thinking about the state and development (1992: 141). Thus, we can reestablish the importance of institutional structures for democracy which, accompanied by challenges towards their accountability, will in consequence lead to the emergence of social resistance.

In this era of globalization, which comes with a threat to the power and legitimacy of institutions, countermovements⁵ have developed as a manner to express societal demands. Even years ago, Polanyi began to express the importance of recognizing the needs of society when he wrote: "class interests offer only a limited explanation of long-run movements in society. The fate of classes is more frequently determined by the needs of society than the fate of society is determined by the needs of classes (2001: 159)." Castells explains that these countermovements, of those permeating the institutions of society (2010: 8), are based on the importance of identity. "Movements may be the most important type of identity-building in our society. It constructs forms of collective resistance against otherwise unbearable oppression, expressing the *exclusion*

⁴ "Civil society is composed of those more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organizations, and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life spheres, distill and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere. The core of civil society comprises a network of associations that institutionalized problem-solving discourses on questions of general interest inside the framework of organized public spheres (Jurgen Habermas, Norms and Facts, 1996: 37)." Another definition of civil society, is "a sphere of social interaction differentiated from the economy and the state, and composed of three analytically distinct parameters— plurality, publicity and privacy (Cohen, 2007: 5)."

⁵ Polanyi defined a countermovement as "a network of measures and policies was integrated into powerful institutions designed to check the action of the market relative to labor, land, and money (2001: 79)."

of the excluders by the excluded (2010: 9)." He then goes on to explain how these movements, which started as resistance, based on identity, and preservation of the economic status quo, evolved into a multiplicity of projects, in which cultural identity, economic interests, and political strategies have combined in an increasingly complex pattern: the *canvas of social movements*⁶ in the network society (2010: 166), which enables social actors to build a new identity that redefines their position in society, and seek the transformation of overall social structure (Castells, 2010: 9). Although there are many examples of these movements, we will now elaborate our argument based on two: the human rights, and the environmental movement.

The scope of social movements which refers to human rights has had many problems with the loss of democratic accountability in the modern era. César Rodríguez-Garavito explains how "in a world moving towards multi-polarity, the traditional exemption from international scrutiny that steward States have enjoyed has become a fundamental problem for the legitimacy and effectiveness of human rights (2014: 505)." Furthermore, he states that the main problems with human rights in the modern era are the following: movements tend to be vertical and rigid, which leaves little room for alternatives; there is an over-legalization that reduces social efficacy; and there is a tendency to adopt legal frameworks as an end in itself, instead of as a means to improving the living conditions of those who suffer violations of human rights (2014: 501). Hence, in spite of the fact that structures are in place to demand human rights, current world mechanisms contradict the accomplishment of concrete goals, and this has led many to rethink the way human rights advocates should present their demands.

Given the loss of efficiency that current structures possess, there should and has been a

⁶ Social movements are contentious forms of collective action that take place outside of conventional institutions of interest aggregation. Social movements involve the emergence of new groups challenging existing elites that mobilize by framing issues in a new way and drawing or developing "repertoires of contention" (Handout Week 9). For Castells, social movements are "purposive collective actions whose outcome, in victory as in defeat, transforms the values and institutions of society (2010: 3)."

tendency to think about human rights in a more globalized sense. As Seidman expresses: "human rights claims can be presented as elements of a global standard– a global public reason, itself part of the world of global politics– that sets out conditions of acceptable treatment (2007: 135)." Therefore, transnational campaigns should be focused less on workplace violations than on much larger patterns of human rights concerns appealing to global audiences on basic issues of human dignity and worth (2007: 134). In this way, the human rights movements is reframing its stance towards combating problems of accountability. Nevertheless, the international human rights movement will continue to face a context of uncertainty due to the rise of a multipolar world with new emerging powers, actors and political strategies, and new challenges and opportunities presented by information and communication technologies. Moreover, and vitally important, human rights questions are also being jeopardized by the threats posed by extreme environmental degradation (Rodríguez-Garavito, 2014: 498). This leads us to our discussion on the next social movement: the environmental movement.

Environmentalism is another demonstration of a social reactive response to unaccountable institutions in the globalized system. The environmental movement has taken several forms and made very different demands within the global framework, but as Castells expresses, this cacophony of theory and practice characterizes environmentalism as a new form of decentralized, multiform, network-oriented, pervasive social movement (2010: 170). Related to the question of accountability "what is challenged by environmental localism is the loss of connection between these different functions and interests under the principle of mediated representation by abstract, technical rationality, exercised by uncontrolled business interests and *unaccountable* technocracies (2010: 182)." Another main issue that arises with the combination of globalization and environmental concerns is the concept of climate justice.

The fact that institutions have been unable to fulfill the demands of environmentalism, combined with global inequalities, has originated the phenomena of environmental injustice. Ciplest defines *climate injustice* as a heightened and disproportionate vulnerability to climate-related harm by disadvantaged social groups, who in general are far less responsible for the problem, and are excluded from decision making about its resolution (2015: 5). When Castells refers to this injustice, he states that this all-encompassing notion that affirms the value of life, of all forms of life, against the interests of wealth and technology, is gradually capturing minds and policies, as the environmental movement enters a new stage of development (2010: 190). So, similar to the human rights movement, globalization has lead society to reassess the manner in which environmental demands are put forth. Ciplest understands the issues with accountability, when he states that "global climate justice necessitates a radical transformation from isolated, fragmented, and top-down civil society efforts that conform to dominant relations of power, to social movements that link grassroots activism to legislative efforts, and respond strategically to globalization's spatial reorganization of environmental problems (2015: 232)." Environmental appeals are yet another form of expressing social inconformity in these new times.

The human rights and the environmental movement have thus illustrated two countermovements to the era of contemporary globalization, which can both be tied back to the problem of unaccountability and inefficacy present in modern-day institutions. It is important to state that, although global institutions do exist for both, they have not been able to create efficient results. Notwithstanding, these movements also possess differences. In his argument on capitalism's commodification of capital, labor and land, Polanyi expressed that labor and land are "the human beings themselves of which society consists and the natural surroundings in which it exists (2001: 75)." Environmentalism can be viewed as a movement to re commodify land, but

the recommodification of labor is only one dimension of the human rights movement, in conjunction with an array of other, more personal, demands. In addition, authors such as Castells express the overall success of the environmental movement, over other social movements, given that it has been able to best adapt to the conditions of communication and mobilization in the new technological paradigm (2010: 186). When comparing to human rights, this could stem from the same problems of over-legalization and reduction of social efficacy that Rodríguez-Garavito mentions (2014: 501). Regardless of the ways which these movements converge, or diverge, they both demonstrate social conflict in times of globalization.

After having established that countermovements arise in the period of contemporary globalization, and using two examples to demonstrate this fact, it is time to question what schemes should be restated or reevaluated. As we can see, movements can be seen as demonstrations of people's needs in a framework with unaccountable institutions. Yet, Evans poses the idea that nowadays, "bureaucracy is under- not over- supply (1992: 176)." Should we demand an emphasis on bureaucracy, that Weber endorsed years ago? In recent years, Habermas states that "society is nothing more than the title meant to encompass the tensions, contradictions ambiguities that arise from the realization of the ideals of freedom and equality (2001: 59)." Karl Polanyi emphasized the fact that state and society cannot be separated, and are "embedded" (2001: 74). In the modern day world, should we reframe and analyze this concept of embeddedness? I argue that bureaucracy and embeddedness undergo a fundamental transformation under this era of globalization, and there should mainly be a change in the conception and application of *accountability* to relate to the society's pleas expressed in movements such as the previously mentioned. Authors, such as Cohen & Sabel, have talked about the "new accountability thesis" which will require the elaboration of new forms of

governance (2004: 765). Castells poses a similar idea, when stating that "to overcome their *growing irrelevance*, nation-states increasingly band together, shifting gears toward a new supranational order of governance (2010: 328). Ergo, institutional legitimacy must be rethought. Still, we are still left with a void in providing an alternative that can express the demands of the countermovements.

I consider that a Habermasian "sense of global civil solidarity (2001: 108)," can play an important role in addressing issues of accountability towards the future. Other authors have posed a similar argument, by stating the need for a global civil society. Yet this idea still necessitates another form of accountability because, as Cohen expresses, the role of globalized civil society actors is greater here than it is on the national level because globally there is no equivalent political society or accountable representative bodies making collectively binding decisions yet subject to the sanction of election (2007: 24). Therefore, civil society actors in each globalized domain have the extra task of pressing for the institutionalization of political society as well as for mechanisms of accountability (2007: 25). Putting these concept into the global arena helps us get "rid of the obsession that only sectional, never general interests can become effective (Polanyi, 2001: 161)." Still, the format and feasibility of a sense of global solidarity are questioned.

To respond to this question of the mechanisms that are necessary to ensure this sense of global civil solidarity, Habermas states an element, which is also one of the bases of democracy: general accessibility of a *deliberative process* (2001: 110). This helps remedy the problem of accountability given that a functioning public sphere, with the quality of discussion, accessibility and the discursive structure of opinion can tip the balance, from the concrete embodiments of sovereign will in persons, votes, and collectives, to make the procedural demands of

communicative and decision-making processes, and loosen the conceptual ties between democratic legitimacy and the familiar forms of state organization (2001: 111). Although Castells emphasizes the importance of a sense of identity, a similar argument can be seen when he talks about the green movement and expresses that "the fact that all of these issues are in the public debate, creates the foundation for their treatment (2010: 169)." Cohen & Sabel also further the emphasis on deliberation when they say that: "Accountability is strengthened not when the actions of the agent are constrained but when the agent is required to explain and justify his actions to those who have the necessary knowledge to evaluate the agent's explanations (2004: 778)." Hence, global solidarity, although still an abstract concept, could someday become feasible if discussions and participations in a social arena are fomented. In a way, the need for deliberation and the expression of concerns is one of the main points of countermovements.

This paper has served to demonstrate the relationship between globalization and social movements. What other movements, apart from the two explained, can be used to illustrate this relationship? If we think of globalization as a "process, not an end-state (Habermas, 2001: 65)," can global civil solidarity face the same problems with legitimacy and efficiency as the institutional framework within the nation-state? Even though in the debate surrounding globalization many interrogations are left unanswered, something is certain: with the extreme challenge that this period of contemporary globalization poses towards the concept of institutional accountability, we must praise the fact that there have existed movements, expressed within the scope of human rights, environmentalism, and other dimensions, to "crystallize" this, now possibly soluble, conflict.

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