Embracing Autonomy
Social movements and the state in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil and Mexico

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Latin American (new) social movements …

Mid 90s onwards:

– Against neoliberalism

– Defence of environment and natural resources

– Struggle for access to basics (e.g. water, oil, land)

– Struggle for political participation, human, civil and indigenous rights, against repression

– Against racism, poverty, unemployment, lack of land, housing, social exclusion, corruption.
‘Autonomy’
New mobilising utopia

– Self determination

– Governed by self-established rules, self-management and self-regulating practices particularly vis-à-vis the state.

– Attempts to create *alternative* economic, cultural, social and/or political practices and relations.

– Collective, a shared project
The practice of autonomy…

…has opened a theoretical space to re-think NGPA, civil society and the state in novel ways.
Aim

Forms in which the practice of collective autonomy by social movements asserts itself in today Latin America

Dilemmas and contradictions

Implications for the notion of civil society and NGPA
Four Social Movements
Embracing autonomy
Findings ESRC NGPA

TWO Research projects 2005-2008

- The movement of the unemployed in Argentina (2005-2008)
- Social movements and the project of autonomy in Latin America (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil and Mexico) (2008)

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- ESRC and the NGPA programme
Autonomous practices

Question

‘actualization of the classic term ‘civil society’ or mutation in the political body? (see Esteva, 1999).

Focus
Tension between rebellion and institutionalisation
1. The Federation of Neighbours’ Councils (El Alto, Bolivia)
Micro governments

- Territorial organisations (200 families each)
- Neighbourhood based micro governments (Assembleism and massive participation at the three levels of organisation)
- Active role in
  - Mobilisation at key moments (e.g. the ‘War for water’ and the Oil War’)
  - everyday life issues. The politics of vital needs’ (Cabezas 2007)
(I)legal

- Recognised by law (No 1551 Participacion Popular, 1994)

- But also semi legal. Dispute the legitimacy of the state

- Supervision and control of use of resources and implementation of public work by the local government (Comisión de Vigilancia)
2. The Movement of Unemployed Workers (Argentina)
New identity

• Created at the roadblocks during 1996/7 and onwards
• Decentralised/Local Identity formation and organisation:
  – From ‘the unemployed’ to Piqueteros
  – From Piqueteros to ‘Unemployed Workers’
‘Genuine Work’

Recovering of damage local social fabric and relations

Provide solutions to everyday needs

Search for ‘genuine work’

Management of employment programmes
From Workfare to Work

Contest workfare

Use existing features of employment and social programmes into opportunities to develop their own projects

Creative autonomous ventures
- Housing cooperatives
- Wood recycling
- Garment factory
- Selection and packing of beans
- Metalworking Shop & Training Centre
- Bakeries
- Literacy campaigns, school dinners, etc.

Community and solidarity values integrated into new policy ethos
3. The Landless Rural Workers Movement, MST, Brazil

Foto: Luciney Martins

Fazenda Giacometi (PR) foto Montse
Land occupation and settlements

- (illegal) Land occupation (unused land) between 1979-1984
- National Rural movement (largest in Latin America) created in 1984
- ‘Revolutionary’ movement
- Encampments and Regional Settlements,
- Territorialisation: everyday life policy, democratisation (political project)
Land reform

- Won land titles for more than 350,000 families in 2,000 settlements

- 180,000 encamped families currently await government recognition
Beyond land distribution: Community projects

Socializacion, colectivisation of production, democracy

Cooperative farms, constructed houses, schools for children and adults and clinics, promoted indigenous cultures and a healthy and sustainable environment and gender equality
4. Zapatistas, Chiapas, Mexico
EZLN and NAFTA

• EZLN: Insurrectionary group
• emerged in 1994
• against neo-Liberal globalisation
• NO to NAFTA: indigenous lands (ejidos) were going to be taken back and opened up for large agro-business
Beyond NAFTA… Enough!

- Symbol for those struggling for dignity and new forms of democracy worldwide.

- Different revolution: no intention to seize state power but politics based on dignity

- Counter power

- New definitions of civil society

- ‘Asking we walk’.. and ‘command while obeying’
New political bodies

- Commonality/community
- Autonomy as radical democracy
- Creation of good government councils: as opposed to bad government
- 30 autonomous municipal governments, 5 Snails (*Caracol*) and 5 Good government Councils
Junta del Buen Gobierno

JBGs: Each has a special committee

• balance the uneven development among different autonomous communities

• mediate conflicts between autonomous councils and government councils.

• denounce violations to human rights, guarantee bi-cultural education and health.

• promote and supervise projects and community programmes, research, etc.
Diversity…Shared Features?
All four

Innovative organisational and identity forms

Creative repertoires of collective action, political projects and values

Everyday politics, self-governance, policy from below

Community/local/ Territorial

‘Illegal and Semi-(i)llegal’ but legitimate.

Rejection of the state power or contested institutionalisation and relationship with the state.
Actualisation or mutation?

Do (current forms of ) autonomy contribute to an ‘actualisation of the classic term ‘civil society’

or

do they imply a significant mutation?
Traditional view

Civil Society

• Public

• Seeks concessions, policy changes from the state

• Complementary to/regulated by the state but does not seek state power

• Democratic function (Diamond 1994)
Autonomy and Critique

• Critique of dominant notions of civil society as a sphere established *apart from*, *regulated via or complementary to* the state

• Challenge to Autonomy framed in the design of the state, i.e. like in decentralisation processes

• Challenge to the power of the state
Autonomy and Mutation?

In different degrees, the four cases show a tendency to...

- experience and conceive civil society as the ‘sphere of autonomously organised society’ which is able to empower itself in ‘rising up’ and activating ‘the power it already has’ (Esteva, 1999: 159)
- not to dispute the power of the state but reject it
- not counterweight the power of the state but make it superfluous
- Civil society to become political!
Rethinking…

• …separations
  – Between political and social
  – Between political and economic)

• …the state as ‘the’ political form of organisation of society

• …the public sphere

• …policy (from above and from below)
Forthcoming Publications (2009)

Dinerstein A C *et al* ‘Embracing Autonomy. Social Movements and the state in Autonomy in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil and Mexico’. NGPA ESRC Working Paper, LSE


Bohn, S, Dinerstein A.C. and Spicer, A. ‘(Im)possibilities of Autonomy. Social Movements in and beyond capital, the state and development’ NGPA ESRC Working Paper, LSE. Submitted to Social Movement Studies
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