

Book Review

Social Movements for Global Democracy

Jackie Smith

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Jackie Smith's "Social Movements for Global Democracy" is a comprehensive study of transnational social movements, or, more precisely, of social movements in their transnational dimension, and their struggles to change the course of global affairs. The author's goal is twofold. On the one hand, she examines the ways in which ordinary people collectively contest neoliberal or capitalist globalization, and how they have come out with alternative proposals that aim at increasing popular control over international institutions. On the other hand, Smith highlights those key findings which can serve activists to be more effective in terms of transforming mobilization into actual outcomes.

In order to achieve these goals, Smith analyzes the constitution of the transnational power and how economic globalization has created its own field of contention, which has become increasingly relevant. The global polity is presented as the product of three elements: the development of transnational capitalism, the constant and increasing flux of information and communication, and the political protest that stems from the former and is facilitated by the latter.

Smith develops her argument in three sections. In the first, she discusses the conceptual implications of the emergence of this global society, and advances a theoretical framework to explain the interactions between the different actors of the global system. Two main concepts are put forward here: rival transnational networks, and complex multilateralism. With the first concept, the author intends to stress that both those promoting the neoliberal agenda and those promoting the democratization of international institutions are, in reality, networks that put together actors of diverse nature, whose access to resources and political opportunities are variable. Networks are, by definition, diffuse. Their boundaries are often difficult to establish. The idea of network emphasizes, thus, that actors are interconnected and that their ties diverge in intensity and direction, depending on the circumstances. What is interesting here is the idea that actors are embedded in different polity layers, through which they are able to participate at the local or immediate level, and at the same time engage in campaigns of global scope. The idea of network, also, underlines that these actors should not be considered as homogeneous blocks. The defection of notorious persons from the neoliberal network is presented as evidence of the fluidity of these networks.

Within the global democracy network, one can find NGOs, labor unions, churches, indigenous communities, intellectuals, but also political parties (either institutions or individual members) and officials of international institutions. They have converged in campaigns that aim at counterbalancing the disproportionate power held by transnational corporations, global financing institutions, and the political leaders and governments of the most influential countries in the world led by the United States.

The concept of Complex multilateralism, in turn, is advanced in order to include economic and civil society actors in the global system. Traditional approaches in international relations have often focused on the state, downplaying the relevance of non-institutional players. According to this concept, instead, the course of the world affairs is not simply determined by the state. Also, international institutions are not simply hierarchies but consensus-seeking bodies (p. 41). Given that these institutions have to create consensus around several issues, an arena of contestation emerges. This situation creates opportunities for groups normally excluded from the agenda to influence on several topics. Civil society groups enter into alliances with different players, including state official, politicians from poor countries or members of international institutions, whose influence varies across different scopes, creating a situation of multilevel governance. The outcomes of these efforts are ambiguous, as they depend on complex decision-making processes in which several stakeholders are involved. In this section, the author convincingly describes how international institutions and the globalization of capitalism have shaped the struggle for global democracy.

In the second part of the book, Smith extensively depicts how these rival networks work, how they have evolved, and their main resources of influence. While the first two chapters of this section are rather descriptive, the author presents in chapter six an original empirical analysis that demonstrates how changes in the international scenario have determined the evolution of the civil society international organizations. Their number has increased over time, and they have adopted a more decentralized and coalitional shape, at the expense of the rather centralized and federated structures that prevailed in the past. New technologies of information and communication have favored this evolution toward decentralized or rhizomatic modes. Also, the author finds that since the late 1990s, many leaders of the global democracy movement have come from national and local organizations. This pattern mirrors similar changes in governmental and corporate forces (p. 129). According to Smith, this suggests that the network form is an important feature of contemporary political and social organizations.

In the third section of the book, Smith presents case studies that illustrate how civil society participation in global politics has contributed to effectively transform multilateral institutions, by introducing principles of democracy and accountability. This part is intended to provide evidence that, by getting involved in the functioning of these institutions and by promoting multilateralism as chief rule for international issues, activists impede neoliberals' advocates to hegemonize international institutions. Also, active participation limits the ability of transnational corporations to set the international agenda. The main lesson of this section is that activists should engage in international institutions and participate within them in order to promote true multilateralism.

Having said this, it should be acknowledged that, both the theoretical and practical moral of this book have already been outlined in other similar works that, to a great extent, paved the way for Smith's. For example, Tarrow's "The new transnational activism" (2005), or Della Porta and collaborators' "Globalization from below" (2006). In fact, Smith draws extensively on the notion that the political context determines the resources and opportunities that challengers have at their disposal, which is at the core of the mainstream approach for the study of contentious politics. In that respect, this book simply extends this framework by demonstrating that it also works in the transnational context. Another debatable aspect of the theoretical framework concerns the concept of transnational rival networks and their confrontation. The problem here is that if one maintains that capitalism has evolved from its original national base to a global phenomenon, then it could be derived the existence of social classes at the global level. What are the implications of globalization of capitalism in terms of class analysis? Does the neoliberal network described in this book represent the political face of a global capitalist class? One of the consequences of this criticism is that one could come to the conclusion that the movement for global democracy, as is labeled by Smith, is mainly the expression of the world middle classes. They are, in fact, those that due to their educational level and culture, share the global ethos that allows the emergence of the "transnational thing". To some extent, it seems that the concept of transnational network is useful to describe this emergent reality but, on the other hand, it eludes a number of problems that come with the idea of global capitalism or global economy. Further empirical research and theoretical reflection should address this. These important questions are left unaddressed in Smith's book.

The main contribution of this book is the thorough account of both the neoliberal network and the global democracy network, and how this challenges the former by promoting values such as multilateralism, human rights, sustainable and green development, and democracy. Case studies describe how these networks contentiously interact but, additionally, they serve Smith to make the point that engagement in institutional politics in international institutions, and the construction of broad coalitions are critical factors to achieve democracy in global issues. Overall, the book can be extremely useful for activists and civil society organizations: the author's analysis provides with practical cues to orientate the options and decisions that these actors face when they engage in campaigns and confront international institutions, corporations, governments and lobby groups. Finally, this work contributes greatly to the debate on the characteristics and consequences of globalization and its political effects.

Cesar Guzman-Concha

References

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