

Latin American Indigenous Social Movements in a Globalized Political Economy

As economic globalization continues to expand around the world, its impacts are increasingly felt at local levels. One realm of local civil society in which this phenomenon can be seen prominently is social movements. Agents of economic globalization, including global financial institutions, foreign direct investments and free trade agreements, are often met with protests and contestation from local actors including students or labor unions. The question remains as to how these agents of economic globalization produce such oppositional social movements. Latin America is a unique region in this regard because, along with the aforementioned groups, there is a prevalence of Indigenous social movements against economic globalization. Comparing different indigenous civil society communities in Latin America will help examine the hypothesis that economic globalization produces neoliberal policies in Latin American countries which exacerbates socioeconomic inequalities, especially for Indigenous communities and thus indigenous social movements form as a response to that inequality. The participant observation method and archival research will help determine common factors across such countries which spark protests. Evaluating the cases of Indigenous movements will draw attention to the unique circumstances and obstacles Indigenous people face in Latin America. This research will answer the question of what factors and conditions, related to economic globalization, produce indigenous social movements in Latin America. Ultimately the research presents information as to how the impacts of globalization are felt at the grassroots level.

Theoretical Framework

Economic globalization's impact on localities can be understood through the theoretical framework of Globalization. The theory of Globalization posits that individuals and groups have a limited ability to adapt or innovate against larger global structures and forces which tend to overwhelm them (Ritzer and Ryan, 60). This imbalance in power is due to "the ambitions of nations, corporations, organizations, and other entities and their desire-indeed, their need-to

impose themselves on various geographic areas” (Ritzer, 194). Thus, this theory can be applied to evaluate how agents of economic globalization, such as States and corporations, produce changes at the local level. Moreover, this process takes place through forces such as capitalism which leads to Globalization in the political realm. For example, the United State’s interventionist foreign policy, especially in Latin America, during the Cold War was motivated by the need of the capitalist system to ward off socialist governments (Ritzer and Ryan, 65). This shows how external forces of globalization such as global capitalism or the foreign policies of regional powers can manipulate socio political realities on national and local levels. Such a phenomenon reinforces the legitimacy of Globalization theory.

The onset of social movements in Latin America can be understood by evaluating the distance between the citizens and the State. This framework goes beyond limitations of the Political Opportunity Structure theory (POS) and New Social Movement Theory (NSM) which are based on political structures and processes unique to Europe. The fundamental shortcoming of these theories is that, “both paradigms are built on "Western" assumptions about modernity and historically specific experiences of democracy, citizenship, and state formation that are more characteristic of Europe and the United States and thus fail to hold true in Latin America” (Davis, 597). The theory of distance considers geographical, institutional, and cultural obstacles which may result in social movements. For example, several social movements in Mexico including the Ejercito Popular Revolucionario and the Navista movement, come from rural provinces and populations which are physically distant from the urban political centers and capital cities (Davis, 606). In addition to physical distance, social movements are also driven by the citizen’s distance in accessibility to state institutions. This is evident in Brazil where the Movimento Sin Terra, a movement of landless workers, mobilized directly against landlords because of “the weak and uneven institutional reach of the state” (Davis, 607). Moreover, this institutional distance is especially egregious for communities of minority cultural backgrounds. In particular, “in many Latin American countries native peoples and linguistic minorities are frequently ignored or bypassed by state institutions, policies, practices, or even national discourses, that they generally have less institutional access to the state, and that they may be more likely to mobilize on the basis of their cultural identities” (Davis, 616). Thus, there exists a

distance between Latin American indigenous communities and institutional political resources which then necessitates that they have to form social movements to change their conditions.

Both Globalization and distance theory allow for sound analysis of how social movements begin and take root in Latin America in relation to economic globalization. Globalization theory offers a framework which can explain how broad international forces, such as economic and political globalization from the spread of global capitalism, can change the conditions of localities within nation states. Distance theory explains how, in regards to Latin America, inaccessibility to established state institutions and resources will necessitate citizens, especially those from minority communities, to join social movements to bring societal change.

Literature Review

There is extensive scholarly literature on social movements in Latin America and the impact of economic globalization in the region. The existing scholarship presents economic globalization in three forms: global development banks, free trade agreements and foreign direct investment. All three of these forms of globalization have produced social movements in Latin America, especially from within the Indigenous communities.

Global Development Banks

In Latin America global development banks are associated with social movements which oppose them. Specifically, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank and other institutions promote neoliberal policies in Latin American countries which then sparks protests against those policies. For example, Sergio Bejar and Juan Andreas Moraes (2016) mention that in 1989, after IMF mandated economic reforms led to an increase in gasoline and public transportation prices, thousands of Venezuelans mobilized in protest against these reforms (Bejar and Moraes, 26). Similarly in 2000, 15,000 Colombian workers protested in the street against austerity measures which were implemented as a requirement attached to an IMF loan (Bejar and Moraes, 26). Further research from Bejar and Moraes shows that a well established system of political parties will decrease public protests against the IMF (Bejar and Moraes, 35). This reinforces the essence of distance theory which

suggests that weak and inaccessible political institutions can lead to protests. Similarly, research from Paul Almeida (2012) details a campaign in El Salvador from 2002 to 2003, against privatizing public healthcare services. This movement involved over 200,000 participants and lasted for over ten months. Almeida mentions the role of the World Bank and the Inter-American Development bank in financing these neoliberal reforms “as part of the larger process of globalization” (Almeida, 1057). Thus, this case study serves as an example of agents of globalization contributing to neoliberal domestic policies which then spark local level social movements. Almeida’s research also illustrated how these social movements impact localities when he highlights activists in El Salvador blockading local transportation routes as part of their demonstrations (Almeida, 1066). Such examples strengthen the credibility of Globalization theory because it shows how large forces of globalization, such as the World Bank or Inter-American Development bank, can influence the domestic policy of nation states which then results in disruptions at the local level as social movements respond to those forces. Further scholarship from Almeida (2007) provides a more detailed explanation as to how Latin American countries are pressured into implementing neoliberal economic reforms by global development organizations. For example he writes, “the pressure to implement market-oriented reforms usually comes in the form of formal binding agreements between the international institution and the indebted national government as a means of repaying past loans or securing a new line of credit” (Almeida, 127). Thus, foreign and national debt accrued from taking loans from international financial institutions, pressures nation-states to turn towards privatization and austerity measures to pay off those loans.

Free Trade Agreements

Similarly, transnational free trade agreements also spark social movements in Latin America. Almeida’s (2007) literature specifically mentions, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) as treaties which drive structural reforms and neoliberal government policies (Almeida, 127). Almeida then cites research which shows that between 1995 and 2001 “961 distinct protest events were documented in Latin America and the Caribbean” against free trade agreements, austerity measures and structural adjustment

(Almedida, 128). Similarly, Rose Spalding (2007) details the opposition movement against CAFTA in El Salvador which was led by two coalitions, Iniciativa CID which believed in negotiations, and Foros Mesoamericano which utilized direct actions (Spalding, 90). This opposition to CAFTA across ideologically diverse movements in El Salvador was driven by failures of previous free trade agreements with Mexico which failed to bring new jobs to the country (Spalding, 98). This existing research demonstrates how agents of economic globalization, such as free trade agreements, will produce neoliberal policies which then elicit protests from citizens.

Foreign Direct Investment

In addition to free trade agreements, foreign direct investment in Latin American countries also sparked protests. Research from Moises Arce and Roberta Rice (2009) focuses on Bolivia as a case study for social movements. Their empirical findings show that “level of foreign direct investment has a positive effect on societal protests” and that foreign ownership of Bolivian natural resources has radicalized broad sectors of society (Arce and Rice, 96). Another example from Central America comes from Costa Rica in the 1970s when the university students and faculty led a “protest campaign against a government mining contract with ALCOA transnational aluminum corporation” (Almeida, 1066).

Indigenous Communities and Social Movements

The existing literature on Indigenous led social movements demonstrates that Latin American Indigenous communities are disproportionately impacted by economic globalization and thus are especially motivated to start social movements to advocate for their rights. A number of examples are provided by scholarship from Alison Brysk and Natasha Bennet (2012) including the “construction of infrastructure such as dams and roads by international agencies, resource extraction transnational corporations, loss of collective lands to privatization, and incursion by impoverished neighbors displaced by national development and globalization” (Brysk and Bennet, 116). An example of this phenomena is found in Peru where between 2007 and 2015, only fifty land titles were given to Indigenous peoples while over 35,000 mining concessions were given out (Gueran, 52). Such projects are protected by police or paramilitary groups which abuse and marginalize indigenous communities, it is in response to such challenges

that movements such as the Zapatista uprising in Mexico took place (Brysk and Bennet, 116). Brysk and Benent go on to present an example of Peruvian indigenous groups blocking roads in 2009 in protest of free trade agreements, deforestation and privatization (Brysk and Bennet, 118). Furthermore, research from Chi-hung Wei (2016) explains how a drop in global oil prices trapped Mexico in a debt crisis and pressured the country into implementing neoliberal economic policies. This sparked rebellion from the Zapatistas in Chiapas (Wei, 232). The example from Mexico demonstrates how changes in the global economy can lead to social movements at the local level in line with Globalization theory. Similarly, Ecuador and Venezuela also implemented neoliberal reforms when the global price of oil dropped but indigenous communities in these two countries protested but did not rebel like the Zapatistas did. Wei's research claims that this difference in response is due to urbanization, in that indigenous communities which move into urban areas to avoid oil production are less likely to express their opposition through rebellion (Wei, 241). This phenomenon reiterates the claims made by Distance Theory to explain the formation of Latin American social movements because urbanization brings these communities closer in physical distance to major political centers and thus they have easier access to state institutions to voice their concerns instead of turning to rebellion.

Exploring the existing literature in Latin America studies demonstrates a lack of scholarship which explores the connection between agents of globalization, Nation-States and local social movements. There is literature exploring how neoliberal policies lead to social movements or how globalization leads to neoliberalism but very little connecting all three together. Filling this gap in research is the rationale for exploring the relation between economic globalization, neoliberal reforms and indigenous social movements. Latin America is the chosen region because the recent indigenous movements across Latin American countries give the region relevance to the topic.

Research Design

To explore the question of how Indigenous led social movements against economic globalization form in Latin America, I will employ archival research which will be cross checked

with participant observation as my methodology. Archival research provides a cost and time efficient option to collect data on whole regions or time periods. Participant observation offers the advantages of collecting rich and nuanced qualitative data and the flexibility necessary for evaluating complex sociological questions such as how social movements form. The case studies for this research will be based in Mexico and Bolivia because Indigenous communities and Indigenous civil society organizations in these countries have a history of active social movement engagement against economic globalization influenced neoliberal policies. For example, the Zapatistas in Mexico resisted against NAFTA (Brysk and Bennet, 116) and the Aymara community in Bolivia protested against the structural adjustment policies and water privatization efforts led by the World Bank in the Cochabamba Water Wars (Brysk and Bennet, 120). As such the Zapatistas and the Aymara community are leaders of two of the most prominent indigenous social movements within the past three decades. Thus they are relevant and useful focus populations for this study.

The archival research will take place by conducting coded open source news analysis. This is a similar methodology as the strategy employed by Bejar and Moraes (2016) in their study of the relationship between party system strength and anti-IMF protests (Bejar and Moraes, 32). The news articles to be sampled will provide information regarding the following variables: the themes of Zapatista and Aymara protest actions in a given year; demonstrations against structural adjustment, privatization, austerity measures, or free trade agreements in a given year; access to state resources and institutions for non-indigenous civil society groups and access to state resources and institutions for the Zapatista and Aymara communities. The time range will be between 1994 and 2024, this exact thirty year time frame will be inclusive to information from the original Zapatista uprising, the Bolivian Water Wars and recent actions from the two groups. To ensure the validity of the historic archival data, I will engage in participant observation methods by attending Zapatista and Aymara demonstrations and conducting semi-structured interviews with demonstration organizers afterwards. Field notes will be taken during observations and interviews will be recorded and transcribed. The interview questions will aim to determine the organizers motivations for their demonstration; relation to the state, and the impacts of economic globalization on daily life. Further questions will be asked to identify

challenges faced by the movement leaders in organizing demonstrations and achieving their demands as well as strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. The interview questions will be worded simply and designed to elicit open ended answers. Follow up questions and probing questions will be prepared for the interview as well. In combining archival research and participant observation research which focuses on two prominent and politically active Indigenous groups, I am able to glean results which highlight the processes and factors involved in the formation of indigenous led anti-globalization movements.

Ethical Considerations

One additional advantage of archival research is that it presents limited ethical risks because there is no direct interaction with living subjects. However, some ethical considerations for this research include not willfully manipulating or misrepresenting the data from the news archives and ensuring that the information from the news archives was gained ethically. With conducting interviews, there are more ethics to be considered. In particular, the research must ensure voluntary participation, and confidentiality. Voluntary participation will be ensured by collecting informed consent forms and repeatedly informing the participants of the objectives of the research in simple language before conducting interviews. Additionally, the participants will be informed of their rights to withdraw from participation at any point during the research procedures. Confidentiality will be ensured by using pseudonyms for all interview participants and subjects of observations. Such ethical considerations will ensure that the research is conducted without harming any participants. Once again, honest representation is important in regards to interviews, misquoting or deliberately leaving out context from the answers of interview participants would be unethical and produce unreliable results. When working with marginalized people such as these Indigenous communities, it is imperative that all ethical considerations are covered because research regarding these communities may impact the public's views and political policies towards them.

Analysis

The main research question of how economic globalization produces indigenous led social movements along with Distance and Globalization theory, provide important analytical focus when studying the collected data. The data from interviews and archives will be transcribed and observed for recurring patterns. Excerpts from interviews and news archives will be organized and analyzed through thematic analysis coding. Themes may include: Social Justice; Economic Justice, Environmental Justice; Economic Globalization; Neoliberal policies; the Government and any other broad themes which are noticeable in the data. Excerpts which present a combination of any of these themes will be classified as a joint theme. For example if an interview participant answers that their motivation for organizing a road block protest is to oppose the structural adjustment policies which led to privatization of forests, this excerpt would be categorized under the combined theme of Environmental Justice, Economic Globalization and Neoliberal policies. After coding the interview responses and news archives into such thematic categories, the categories with the most excerpts will be considered as the primary reasons for Zapatista and Aymara civil society groups to engage in social movements. These results will then be compared against the hypothesis that economic globalization produces domestic austerity measures in Latin American countries which exacerbates socioeconomic inequalities, especially for Indigenous communities and thus indigenous social movements form as a response to that inequality. The flexibility of the coding method allows for nuanced qualitative data like interview responses to be classified into broad categories and thus the research can produce generalizable results.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations with the aforementioned research methodology. In regards to archival news research, there may be a lack of sources which detail the activities of the Zapatista or Aymara community specifically. Additionally, there is a risk of encountering biased, opinionated, or inaccurate information from the archived news articles. Similarly, a major concern with participant observation research is that the researcher becomes biased after

immersing themselves among the participants. Furthermore, a significant shortcoming in the research design is in regards to the focus populations. Although, as mentioned in the existing literature, the Zapatistas and Aymara have led prominent social movements against economic globalization in the past, they may not be reflective of contemporary indigenous social movements in Latin America. Therefore, further research which studies indigenous civil society organizations across more than two Latin American countries would contribute to the scholarly discourse regarding how indigenous communities in Latin America respond to globalization.

Implications and Conclusion

This research offers a model for understanding Latin American indigenous social movements in an intersectional context because they would be studied in relation to various issues. If the results support economic globalization as a significant cause of Zapatista and Aymara social movements and demonstrate intersection with other themes, then the research will highlight the specific factors or conditions associated with economic globalization which elicit social movements at the local level. Moreover, the research will expand the existing scholarship on the topic of social movements and indigenous communities in the age of globalization.

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