

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Simin Fadaee (ed)**, *Understanding Southern Social Movements*, Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2016. ISBN: 9781138898004 (cloth); ISBN: 9781315708843 (ebook)

This is an interesting and timely edited book that draws together a collection of essays about social movements, politics and social change in Latin America, Africa and Asia. The book covers a variety of issues of social transformation such as democracy, the role of the state, sexuality, and the environment, charting new dynamics of collective action in 15 different countries. In so doing it attempts to question the Global Northern-centrism of social movement theorizing by analysing empirically rich case-study materials from varied geographical locations.

Specifically, the book intends to intervene in “Northern” dominated social movement theorising, by rejoining social movement scholars to pay more attention to empirical case studies from the Global South and to stimulate social movement scholars working in “Southern” contests to engage in theory building. Following an introduction setting out the key arguments of the collection, the book is arranged in two parts. In the first part, the volume considers movements mobilizing around issues of rights and quality of life concerns. This includes analysis of the environmental movement in Iran; dam evictees’ movements in Maharashtra, India; women’s movements in Morocco and Kenya; human rights NGOs in Mexico; and LGBTI movements in Côte d'Ivoire, Malawi, Namibia and South Africa. The second part of the book considers the post-2011 wave of contention that commenced with the Arab Spring uprisings and includes the uprisings in Egypt, Yemen and Turkey, as well as recent protests in Brazil, the student movement in Chile and democracy struggles in Thailand.

A series of key themes are drawn out from this diverse array of case studies, that call on a redefinition of social movement theory to take account of movements from the “South”: how different regime types lead to the emergence of different opportunity structures and cultures of activism; the significance of historical and geographical contexts of movement practices; state-society relations; and the importance of intersectionality in understanding movement behaviours.

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As such there is much to commend in this collection, not least the diversity of movements and contexts studied. However, the book suffers from some serious limitations that pertain to a limited reading of social movement theories currently emerging around the world as well as an almost non-existent reading of the contribution of Geography to the study of social movements over the past two decades.

First, the book is limited by the object of its critique, namely “Northern” social movement theorising. While correctly challenging the Northern-centric character of much social movement theorising and exposing certain limitations therein, the book does not fully attempt to develop what a “Southern” perspective might actually look like. Further, the book fails to fully engage with the exciting ideas on struggle emerging from the Global South. Hence, while there is mention and some use of authors such as Asef Bayat (who wrote the forward to the book) and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, there is very limited engagement with key Latin American theorists such as Arturo Escobar and Raúl Zibechi (amongst others). Escobar’s early work with Sonia Alvarez on Latin American social movements (Escobar and Alvarez 1992) is engaged with a little, and the chapter on Mexico gives the nod to Escobar, Zibechi and others. However, the book is silent on Escobar’s (2008) and Zibechi’s (2010, 2012) more recent work on social movements and territory.

This limits the book in important ways because this work (amongst others) engages with ideas that are emerging from within movements as well as being about them. An engagement with such research would contribute significantly to a re-theorising of movements from the Global South. In addition, while there are some excellent chapters within the book—such as those on new protests in Brazil and Turkey—the importance of key social movements such as the MST in Brazil to both mobilisation as well as theorising is omitted. This is an important oversight since an extensive literature exists on such movements and has contributed significantly to social movement theory.

Second, while calling for the importance of place-specificity in social movement theorising (something that is critical for any perspective on social

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movements) there is a woeful absence of engagement with the now substantial *geographical* literature on social movements. Over the past two decades a range of geographers—Byron Miller, Walter Nicholls, Paul Routledge and Wendy Wolford, to name but a few—have made significant interventions in social movement theorising, analysing the complex spatialities of social movements, including: the politics of place; spatial inequalities; everyday forms of activism; the politics of scale; networked political action; assemblage practices; and what the concept of territory brings to social movement theory. A significant amount of this work has been conducted in the Global South; for example, the work of Brazilian geographer Bernardo Fernandes.

Like most edited collections the book is uneven; however, while its goals are laudable the seriousness of its lacunae undermine its potential impact. Finally, a powerful agenda-setting conclusion would have improved this book.

## References

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Paul Routledge  
School of Geography  
University of Leeds  
P.Routledge@leeds.ac.uk

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