

Class, Multitude, Movements, and Parties: Building Alliances

Thursday 27, 8.30 – 11.30

The questions of building alliances is, of course, crucial. (I will not talk in my first intervention about the relationship between “class” and “multitude”.)

My first argument is that talking about alliances between parties and movements should consider that – despite all differences between different parties and, even more, between different movements. Parties as a specific form of politics are part of the state. There is no party bashing intended but a more sophisticated analysis.

Then I make the point that thinking alliances goes hand in hand with acknowledging differences, tensions and contradictions. It is not simply a lack of discussion but of different experiences, living conditions, forms of being dominated. The question of tension and plurality is under explored in the global social movements. Some have a rather additive, others a rather instrumentalist understanding of plurality.

political parties

Without denying their importance, the problem for emancipatory parties is that they act on a terrain which is not structured by themselves. The “rules of the party game” exist and are made by bourgeois parties and a more or less long history of structuring a “party system”. The “rules of the state game” exist as well. The state is relatively separated from the economic, depends on taxes and tariffs from the well-being of the economy. Capitalist class and patriarchal gender structures are part of the state structure itself.

One central function of the capitalist state is that it fragments the dominated and helps to organise the ruling forces. The idea of a party is that they are the expression of social interests and, moreover, that they organise these interests. But they do it in a selective way. From history we know that this representation is never comprehensive: That is one reason why social movements and NGOs emerge, they do not feel represented.

The logic of the state and bourgeois public, the integration into decision-making processes and Realpolitik should not be underestimated. This is not because of corrupt leaders or the wish to pursue careers but it is a structural moment of the party system.

Moreover, for many movements it is an historical experience that parties tend to dominate movements: They have more resources (often given by the state), more acknowledgement, more structure. Parties need to be “generalists” in the sense to act on all “political” issues (which are “important” usually for dominant actors). They tend to attract people who think that the major struggle is really about taking state power to change the world.

At the other hand, parties have a privileged access to the political apparatus and one aspect in modern, bourgeois, complex societies. This should not be underestimated as well. Beside domination states are the instances of the rule of law. We should not be innocent that there is the rule of law always existing (of course, there are many violations) but we cannot let the problem aside.

How can emancipatory aspects in a society be generalised and institutionalised? Is it possible to think another, emancipatory world without complex planning mechanisms and therefore norms and rules in favour of a “well-functioning” of societies and the world as a whole and the well-being of all human beings and environmental sustainability?

I don't have an answer to this question but we should think if we discuss that for a post-capitalist society law is important (and I would say it is) and if yes how to realise it.

I would like to give you an example of my context: The important experience of the German Green Party.

In a recent interview one of the founders of the Green Party who is from the radical left and was in the 1980s one of the speakers of the party and member of the German Parliament (Thomas Ebermann in *Freitag*, 14. Jan. 2004) that one experience of social movements, especially the environmental movement, in the 1970s was that the state's response to their actions was violent. So they intended to change the rules of using state power, to civilise it, and formed, among other objectives, a party which was intended to be an expression of the movements without dominating them. We know today that the Greens went through the state and the state went through the Greens, that the fraction of Realpolitik predominated, that there is a whole new generation of technocratic policy-makers in the party who use it for a careers and more or less progressive contents.

In another sense we could give the example of the Socialist Party PDS and their politics of neoliberal adjustment in the city government Berlin.

But the problem is still there: How can emancipatory aspects in a society be generalised and institutionalised? (Or is this a wrong question?)

movements

I do not intend to give a definition of social movements; they are often issue specific: the networks against the privatisation of water are rather different from those of struggles against biopiracy, those of struggles for housing are different from those of taming financial capital. Of course, there are moments; sometimes they are eruptive without or few continuation like the anti-war movement in Europe two years ago;

Moreover, to reduce movements to their actions in the public – the dominant perspective in mainstream media and academic research – does not make sense. Many processes in movements are not visible but however crucial: counter-cultures, processes of politicisation, alternative knowledge, they might be part of different forms of everyday reproduction of people.

I like the concept of “diffuse networks” which means that emancipatory struggles take place in many contexts, in an incredible amount of situations – questioning forms and contents of power, resisting a moment or longer, constructing concrete alternatives. They have some diffuse things in common, produce resonance, but sometimes even don't know from each other.

The difference to parties is that movements are often not state centred. And in the neoliberal transformation it is becoming clear that the capitalist state is not – and was never - a privileged site for changing society in an emancipatory sense.

alliances: tensions and contradictions among (potential) allies

If we think in terms of alliances we need to acknowledge that there are many tensions and contradictions among emancipatory actors. These tensions or even contradictions are often left out in our discussions. A presumed “we” is constructed which does not exist in reality.

This is ambiguous: A kind of identity politics is necessary but it should not leave to a non-discussion of differences. We can observe at the social forums that we still need to develop a culture of productive conflicts.

But my main point here is that we need to acknowledge these tensions and contradictions and “work” through them. This is a complex process not only of a discussion in Porto Alegre but of complex learning processes, of changing power relations, conditions of material reproduction.

To give you an example: Most of the workers and unions in a country like Germany are integrated and let themselves actively integrate into neoliberal and neoimperial consensuses. And many of us are materially highly integrated in the capitalist state or economic system as well.

Changing the world radically would imply processes to transform through learning processes, viable alternatives and emancipatory horizons the orientations of us and many others.

It cannot be dealt with these issues with moralism but through a constant shift of everyday living conditions, forms of production and reproduction, subjectivities, social and political institutions, the public sphere.

But what does this mean concretely? For our discussions, for the development of strategies?

parties and movements under the condition of neoliberal hegemony

Hegemony means that the ruling forces, especially classes but at the international level also state representatives, are able to organise themselves (with Gramsci: moving beyond corporatist interests) and formulate a vision for the whole society. Under hegemonic conditions, i.e. a broadly accepted development of society. I would argue that in the North-Western countries a kind of neoliberal and neoimperial hegemony does exist.

In the societies of the Global South this is different. Even some governments intend to questions not only the contents of international politics and the world market but even the structures themselves.

I leave that open to discussion but we should think what this mean for the building of alliances, for the relevance of differences between class and multitude.