The Norm Implementation Role of Transnational Social Movements

Autor: Horacio Almanza-Alcalde

Among the multiple definitions of a social movements, some categorize the manifestations and general aims that move activism. A short review follows of some of the different classifications of social movements, principally transnational ones.

R. Cohen, using an early model from Aberle and Wilson, suggests four kinds of social movements, namely ‘transformative’, reformative, redemptive and alternative (2000). The transformative ones focus on structural change in a violent form, like radical political groups, or anticipate a ‘cataclysmic change’, including movements with religious roots. The reformative type aims ‘...at partial change to try to offset current injustices and inequalities’. It fosters positive change by removing such burdens, creating a ‘...more just social order and a more effective and viable polity’. Usually this type of movement, adopts a single issue as point of departure in their efforts at restructuring exclusive policies.

The 2000 Jubilee focused on principle on reducing the external debt of poor countries; after a considerable success the strategy focused later on changing the world trade rules, targeting authorities from transnational organisations such as the WTO. Redemptive movements imply an internal individual change. This type is commonly approached through the New Religious Movements perspective. Finally, Cohen describes alternative movements by alluding to the ‘...countercultural values, the rejection of materialism and the development of unconventional lifestyles characteristic of some Western youth, a phenomenon often dated from the 1960s’.

Rather than intending to change any element of the system, they aim at developing a parallel, viable and sustainable way of life, according to some ecological and spiritual values. Aware of the changing nature of social phenomena, he makes the point that no movement fits exactly into each box. This classification is a useful point of departure for the analysis of common elements between movements, and the identification of lack of links between them, which is relevant to the following examination of the relation between different kinds of movements that share objectives and targets; but may differ on strategies and resources.

This section focuses on the reformative movement, mainly its orientation towards exerting direct pressure on policy changes at governmental and intergovernmental levels. Some scholars refer to processes of solidarity built-up in a “top-down” direction. One of the strategies mentioned is the generation of constituencies for global policies.

Through conscientization and transnational education campaigns, TSMOs engage with national and local networks, to gather public support for their policy shaping claims (Eterovic and Smith, 2001: 205; Kriesberg, 1997: 18, Keck and Sikkink, 1998:9). The aim is to ‘...relate citizens concerns to global institutions and processes’, by spreading information, and enhancing peoples engagement in social change agendas (Eterovic and Smith, 2001: 205). This, in words of Passy, is a new face for the job of Solidarity movements: to direct their actions towards the inclusion of ‘political claim making addressed
to power holders’; in contrast with the early model, dominated by acts of assistance and relief (Passy, 2001: 10).

Lobbying for policy changes is a feature of NGOs engaged in social movements and requires an effective flow of information between members of TSMs, or as Keck and Sikkink calls it, advocacy networks. In this sense, a good communication network is not only necessary for the diffusion and sharing of values, and the strategies for its inclusion in systems of rules. A closer engagement is also needed with the disadvantaged sectors they claim to be representing and advocating for. This level of communication is fundamental for shaping the ideas and demands that are allegedly a norm in cross-border inter-governmental spheres.