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Concepts of Social Movement Studies and the Case of Resistance Against the High Cost of Living in Burkina Faso: Protests or a Social Movement?[1]

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I. Introduction

Social movements occur in many parts of the world, yet their exact forms of appearance remain not only diverse, but also open for discussion. Over the last decades, researchers from different disciplines have looked for ways to study collective action in general, and to analyse patterns of mobilization and resistance in particular. However, there is no single definition or way for explaining the formation and course of action of social movements. Instead, scientists continue to come up with new theories and conceptualizations. Furthermore, social movements do not exist in isolated worlds, but in broader social, cultural, political, and economic contexts that need to be taken into account for a better understanding of their emergence and deployment.

In this paper I therefore give an overview of different definitions and concepts that scholars have developed in order to understand and analyse social movements. Specifically, the concepts I would like to look at are the resource mobilization theory, the political opportunity structures approach and framing.

Thereafter, I will put these concepts in relation to the case of resistance against the high cost of living in Burkina Faso. Not only do I apply the introduced concepts to my analysis of the case study, I also take a closer look at the question of how actors with relatively limited access to material resources succeed in mobilising people into collective action. Lastly, I will clarify if the mobilisation against the high cost of living should rather be called protests or a social movement.

II. Conceptualization and Theoretical Embedding

Concepts and definitions of social movements evolved in Western countries (Tilly 2006: 183-184; in Mukherji 2013: 1), but in order to get a wider impression I want to begin by comparing three definitions made at different times by authors from the United

States, Italy and India. Tilly, Melucci and Mukherji that I refer to here each identified three major, but different elements of social movements: While Tilly talks of (1) claim-making; (2) public performances and (3) repeated public displays of unity and commitment (Tilly 2006: 183-84; in Mukherji 2013: 1), Melucci names as main dimensions: "(a) commonalities, shared identities, objectives and understandings among the actors; (b) 'adversarial relations with opposition who claim the same goods or values'; and (c) 'actions that exceed the tolerance limits of a social system, thereby pushing it to change'" (Edelman 2001: 289, in Mukherji 2013: 2). Whereas Melucci's first point fits to Tilly's last, and Melucci's second point to Tilly's first, the third dimension of Melucci referring to social change is new compared to Tilly's perspective. It is not new; however, to Mukerji's way of thinking since he, too, identifies "social conflict, social or collective mobilisation and social change *in their interrelation"* (Mukherj 2013: 3) as essentials for the conceptualization of social movements.

By looking at these definitions, one can recognize several overlaps as well as variations in perceptions over time. In early contributions starting from 1966, Tilly and others describe social movements in a minimalistic way as "rational, purposeful, and organized actions" (Della Porta/Diani 2006: 14). This definition is vague, and it is more in later definitions that a clear focus is laid. It is laid on the importance of interactions, conflict and change. Social movements are perceived as attempts to transform existing norms and their origin is believed to arise from "the co-existence of contrasting value systems and of groups in conflict with each other" (Della Porta/Diani 2006: 12f). Other more detailed descriptions put further emphasis on network, sharing and identity. Della Porta and Diani consider social movements to be linked by dense informal networks, to be involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents, and to share a distinct collective identity (Della Porta/Diani 2006: 20). The same is confirmed by the definition that social movements are "interlocking networks of groups, social networks and individuals, and the connection between them is a shared collective identity that tries to prevent societal change by non-institutionalized tactics" (van Stekelenburg/Klandermans 2009: 20f; cf. Della Porta/Diani 1999, in Brandes/Engels 2011: 9). Within sociology, recent developments have come to completely replace the term 'social movement' by using 'contentious politics' instead. Yet, the meaning remains relatively unchanged. It still aims to describe "the phenomenon of organised social

resistance to hegemonic norms" (Leitner et al 2008: 157). In a longer definition, Leitner et al describe contentious politics as "concerted, counter-hegemonic social and political action, in which differently positioned participants come together to challenge dominant systems of authority, in order to promote and enact alternative imaginaries" (Leitner et al 2008: 157f). Hence, hegemony is the crucial new aspect coming in here. Another new aspect to present-day conceptions of social movements is given by Souza who emphasizes the importance of autonomy (Souza 2006: 333). To his mind, striving for autonomy implies using local knowledge in order for social movements to reach to more strategic ways of thinking and acting (Souza 2006: 330).

To sum up and after having identified notions of social change, conflict, sharing, identity, collective action and autonomy as central to the analysis of social movements, I want to lastly look at clear distinctions between protests and social movements. This is going to be vital for my following analysis of the resistance against the high cost of living in Burkina Faso and for answering the questions if it can rather be considered as a social movement or as protests. Rucht and Neidhardt define protests as a "collective, public action by non-state actors that expresses resistance or critique and that is connected to the formulation of a social or political demand" (Rucht/Neidhardt 2001: 537, in Eberlei 2014: 2). In contrast to protests, they define social movements as "mobilized networks of individuals, groups and organizations which, based on a shared collective identity, attempt to achieve or prevent social change, predominantly by means of collective protest" (Rucht/Neidhardt 2001: 555, in Eberlei 2014: 2). Protests in contrary to social movements do, thus, not initially require organized actors, and social movements; on the other hand, can emerge out of protests.

Before using these definitions for the case study of resistance against the high cost of living in Burkina Faso, I will now look at relevant concepts and theories for further understanding.

Resource Mobilization Theory

The concept of resource mobilization belongs to the first theoretical approaches in the field of social movement studies. It was built upon definitions like Tilly's that emphasized the rationality and intentionality of political protest. The framework of

resource mobilization theory suggests that actors in social movements particularly need resource accumulation and organisational structures to mobilize. With resources, theorists mean not only material, but also moral, cultural, socio-organisational and human resources, whereby the higher presence of one resource can compensate for the lower availability of another to a certain extent (Engels 2015: 109). Moreover, according to the assumed rationality, actors try to intentionally make best use of the resources they have and minimise the requirement for those they do not have (Rootes 1990: 7). Yet, the theory was criticized for "being overly concerned with processes internal to social movements (..) and for neglecting factors (...) [that might also be] crucial to the[ir] success or even survival" (Rootes 1990: 7). These other factors can be actions and reactions of external actors like the state (Rootes 1990: 7). In addition, the theory focuses on means to act rather than on how motivation, goals, dynamic interactions and processes evolve among actors (Jasper 2010: 966f).

Political Opportunity Structures Approach

The political opportunity structures approach opposes the resource mobilization theory by arguing that an exclusive focus on resources cannot explain the emergence, impact and development of political protests or collective action, but that it is rather the context in which they are embedded that is pivotal. Context here means a variety of structural conditions and dimensions of the political environment. In addition, any context is considered dynamic. It is "created, contested, shifted, de- and reconstructed through the interaction of protest actors and authorities" (Engels 2015: 109f). Windows of opportunity hence also play a central role since the dynamism of contexts implies "that people engage in social movements and protest when patterns of enabling and hindering structures are shifted, and (...) new opportunities for contentious collective action [are created]" (Engels: 2015: 109).

The comparison of the resource mobilization theory and the political opportunity structures approach shows how attention in social movements studies shifted from organization to interaction and from the formation to the development and outcomes of

social movements (Rootes 1990: 7). This corresponds to the earlier observed shifts in definitions.

Framing

Framing as another concept relates to the

> "ways in which actors in contentious politics [or social movements] present a specific problem through their discourses and practices; the causes, solutions and means of action they derive from the problem; and the deployment of these discursive frames for protest mobilisation" (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow 2004, in Engels 2015: 110).

Since people are situated differently in social structures, they also perceive and interpret events, social conflicts and grievances in different ways (Rootes 1990: 8; Brandes/Engels 2001: 3). Therefore, social movement actors produce frames as a set of shared beliefs and meanings. Through framing, they are able to reach, address and mobilize different actors from different backgrounds (Engels 2015: 110). Thus, framing can provide "an explanation as to why successful mobilisation occurs at certain times and not at others, even when conditions are similar (Snow/Benford 1992: 143–145, in Engels 2015: 110).

Critique

When it comes to concepts about social movements in recent years, the opinion or trend seems to prevail that there cannot be a single, overarching, unifying theory. Rather, there should be several small concepts or 'micro-foundations' of social and political action that contribute to the overall understanding of social movements. A reason given for this opinion is that a single grand theory would impoverish analysis by offering a partial viewpoint instead of drawing attention to multivalent and co-implicated spatialities (Jasper 2010: 965f, 974; Leitner et al 2008: 158). The variety of spatialities meant here includes scale, place, networking, positionality, and mobility. According to Leitner et al, all spatialities matter "for the imaginaries, material practices and trajectories of contentious politics" (Leitner et al 2008: 165). With regard to the three 'big' concepts from above,

Bettina Engels comes to the conclusion that empirically all three are inseparably entangled and that it is only theory that deals with resources, opportunities and framing separately (Engels 2015: 110). Hence, it appears that when studying social movements, one should aim at a holistic perspective taking as many aspects, theories, spatialities and imaginaries as possible into consideration. In this respect, "means of action matter as much as the goals, the arenas as much as the players (...) [and] [g]oals are as central to strategic approaches as are tactics" (Jasper 2010: 974). This implies that researchers are advised to look at all mechanisms that carry meanings instead of using separate theories (Jasper 2010: 973). Moreover, contemporary social movements as highly context-phenomena "can only be understood embedded in the historical and socio- political context they have emerged from, therefore the political systems in which contentious collective action take place is particularly significant" (Engels 2015: 110). This applies to resistance and social movements worldwide. Lastly, I would like to note that most concepts and theories have been developed mostly based on studies of socio-political movements in Europe and North- and South America (Tilly 1978, Tarrow 1998, Della Porta/Diani 1999 in Brandes/Engels 2011: 2). As a result, there is not much empirical evidence of how useful they proof to be for other geographical contexts. Therefore, I now want to try applying the presented concepts as well as their critique to the case of resistance against the high cost of living in Burkina Faso.

III. Case Study: Against the High Cost of Living in Burkina Faso

From January to February 2008, food prices in Burkina Faso increased by 30 percent for meat, by 44 percent for corn and by 50 percent for cooking oil (*Mission Conjointe Gouvernement, Agences du Systèmes des Nations Unies*, and Save The Children UK 2008: 5, in Engels 2015: 111). These increases resulted, amongst other reasons, from the global financial crisis, from structural causes like an overly strong focus on commercial agricultural production and structural adjustment programs as well as from the debt crisis that started in the 1970s (Amin 1973; McMichael 2009, in Engels 2015: 111). Generally, the situation in Burkina Faso within previous years had been characterized by

> "social inequalities, high unemployment, limited prospects for young people in particular (...), police violence, a climate of impunity, a political system that locked out the people, a bourgeoisie tied up with political and

administrative mismanagement, the spiralling cost of living, longevity in power, (...) [and] [w]ealth (..) concentrated in the hands of a minority close to the president" (Chouli 2014: 264).

Thus, it was no surprise that resistance against the higher prices started right after the triggering event of increased food prices in late February 2008 when shopkeepers took to the streets, resisting against the implementation of a new communal development tax. Food riots followed in several cities. Public buildings were damaged, road blockades were built up and set on fire, people were injured, and hundreds arrested. Consequently, trade unions assembled in March 2008 with other civil society groups, like student movements and human rights organisations to form an alliance. They called it 'CCVC' – *C*oalition nationale de luttre *C*ontre la *V*ie *C*hère – which in full form translates to national coalition against the high cost of living, corruption, fraud, impunity and for liberty (Engels 2015: 112). As the main force in mobilisation, the CCVC organized demonstrations, general strikes and mass rallies in March, April and May 2008 until the government yielded to at least some of their central claims from 2008 onwards (Engels 2015: 108). The government adopted measures like temporary price fixing and the suspension of import duties and value added taxes (VAT) on staple goods. However, other concessions like the suspension of the initially unwanted communal development tax and the reduction of wage taxes with an increase in salaries in the public sector were only made three years later in 2011. Therefore, some argue they might not be directly linked to the resistance that took place in 2008, but rather constitute an outcome of the political crisis in 2011 (Engels 2015: 112). During this crisis, protests against the high cost of living were nevertheless revitalized after relatively low mobilisation during 2009 and 2010 (Engels 2015: 114). Hence, it is hard to clearly determine to what extent the mobilisation contributed to the changes made by the government and to what extent other factors played a role. When trying to measure the success of the resistance against the high cost of living, it should also be mentioned; however, that the changes taken by the government did not affect the whole population of Burkina Faso evenly. Since more than 70 percent of the Burkinabe live in rural areas and rarely have a salary, they do not profit as much from the reduced wage taxes as the urban middle class (Engels 2015: 112f). Furthermore, all changes taken by the government still happened within a "re-establishment of the previous social order" (Chouli 2014: 286). Even though the success of the outcomes of the resistance against the high cost of living in form of government

measures is debatable, it is undisputed that the CCVC succeeded in mobilizing large numbers of different actors. Moreover, they continued to successfully mobilise masses not only again in 2011, but also in May 2012 when they organized a central demonstration in the capital Ouagadougou in response to increased petrol prices (Engels 2015: 114). In the next section of this paper, I would therefore like to analyse which conditions made the successful mobilization against the high cost of living possible and if they should rather be considered a series of protests or a social movement. While doing so, I will refer to the above elaborated concepts and theories.

Conditions and Circumstances for Successful Mobilization

Although broad concepts like resource mobilization, political opportunity structures and framing have been criticized, they turn out to be useful to some degree in analysing the resistance against the high cost of living in Burkina Faso from 2008-2012 - as I will show in the following paragraphs. In terms of material resources, actors were on the one hand limited. On the other hand, trade unions and student movements, as members of the most active participants in mobilisation in Burkina Faso, have a long tradition of political protest dating back to the 1960s. During the 1980s for instance, they were involved as main drivers in the process for democratisation. Additionally, it has been common for trade unions specifically to intervene in national politics beyond labour-related issues (Engels 2015: 113). Consequently, they could build on previous experiences and networks, and were able to compensate the lack of material resources with socio-organisational resources (Engels 2015: 116).

Regarding political opportunity structures, the food price crisis in the beginning of 2008 led to a temporal change in structural conditions, and thus opened a 'window of opportunity' that favoured mobilisation (Engels 2015: 114). In times of low opportunity; by contrast, trade unions regularly organized workshops for activists, internal training activities and gave out member journals in order to maintain basic preconditions for mobilisation (Engels 2015: 114). This shows their abilities to organise in general and to call for mobilisation in respective time frames that open opportunities for action.

Now that it has been seen that both concepts - resource mobilisation and political opportunity structures – could be applied to the mobilisation and collective action against the high cost of living in Burkina Faso, I also want to show that the same applies to the concept of framing. The situation in Burkina in 2008 was framed especially in three ways to link relevant issues and actors together for collective mobilisation. One frame presented the 'high cost of living' as a problem resulting from the steadily growing wage–price gap. This frame matched central demands of trade unions and helped them to mobilize. A second frame presented 'high cost of living' as rooted in the rising costs of basic social services like education. Through this argument, students were integrated into the mobilisation. As a third example the 'high cost of living' was also framed as a human rights issue by arguing that "[t]he fundamental causes of (...) [the high cost of living] [are] the mismanagement of the human, material and financial resources of the country, characterised by corruption, fraud, [and] impunity for political and economic crimes" (Engels 2015: 115). As a result, human rights organizations were tied in as well. In sum, many aspects played a role for successful mobilisation against the high cost of living in Burkina Faso. Consequently, I cannot per se support the critique that broad, theoretical concepts are no longer relevant. It is indeed important, however - as Engels pointed out - not to perceive them as separated, but rather as entangled ways of explaining mobilisation. Hence, I share the recommendation to not only use one single theory but a combination of concepts and different spatialities for a multi-perspective analysis.

Against the High Cost of Living: Protests or a Social Movement?

Coming back to the definitions brought up in the beginning and looking at the way I presented the case study, it might have been obvious that I mostly talked of 'mobilisation' or 'resistance', instead of protests or social movement. This is because I had found authors using both terms (protests and social movement), and blurring clarity in understanding the phenomenon that took place in Burkina Faso under the slogan 'against the high cost of living'. In her writings on social movements in Burkina Faso, Lila Chouli for example talks about the *protests against the high cost of living* as being part of a historical sequence of increased popular *protests*, only to say in the next sentence that "the main

challenge of *these social movements* is offering a credible alternative to the system in place that goes beyond short-term 'gains'" (Chouli 2014: 293f). Referring to Engels' analysis of the situation in 2008 in Burkina Faso, Eberlei similarly first labels the reactions to the massive food price rises as "spontaneous protests or riots" (Eberlei 2014: 2), while saying shortly afterwards that "representatives of the *social movement behind the protests* negotiated social and economic policy reforms with the government" (Eberlei 2014: 2f).

Despite the confusion, I nonetheless find these statements interesting, and to understand them better I want to briefly look back in detail at the central definitions from the beginning:

Protests consist of: (1) <u>collective, public action</u>, (2) <u>non-state actors</u>, (3) expression of <u>resistance or critique</u> and (4) formulation of a <u>social or political demand</u>.

Social movements are: (a) <u>mobilized networks of individuals, groups and organizations</u> with (b) a <u>shared collective identity</u> (c) to <u>achieve or prevent social change</u> (d) by <u>means of collective protest</u> (Rucht/Neidhardt 2001: 537, in Eberlei 2014: 2).

In my opinion what took place as spontaneous reactions to the increase in food prices in February 2008 was at first neither. Individuals took to the streets with acts of violence. Thus, these were in fact riots. What happened after the riots; however, was the formation of the CCVC, but what does this mean? Looking at the above highlighted characteristics, I think the CCVC is best described as a network of organisations, yet not additionally of groups and individuals (a). The CCVC succeeded in mobilising people through framing and the common slogan 'against the high cost of living', yet there are no clear signs that strongly speak for a shared collective identity among participants, since concrete goals and motivations of shop keepers, students, trade unions and human rights organisations for instance were different (b). The CCVC did clearly use means of collective protest (d), yet it seems exaggerated to me to say that they wanted to achieve or prevent social change since they asked for concrete government measures and not far-reaching system changes (c). Looking at this analysis, it therefore seems hard to call the events that took place in Burkina Faso in 2008 a social movement. So rather, I would say that the CCVC mobilised for collective, public action (1) as non-state actors (2) in order to express their resistance and critique (3) against the high cost of living by formulating clear social and political demands like the abolishment of the communal development tax (4). That way, all characteristics of a protest are fulfilled. Nevertheless, Eberlei talked of a

social movement behind the protests. When I discussed the theories and concepts of social movements, I stressed the importance of context and historical embedding like Engels did. And what also becomes clear in Chouli's publication is in fact that the same actors that were the main drivers in the protests against the high cost of living, were also main actors in different protests long before and still after. Against this background, it can indeed be said that the same actors pushed for a deeper social change, expressing a wider resistance against the president in particular and the government in general when considering a longer period of time (Chouli 2014). In conclusion, I hence interpret Eberlei's statement in the way that the collective action against the high cost of living in Burkina Faso in 2008 and slightly in 2011 happened in the form of protests that are in a larger time frame again embedded in phenomena of a 'higher' social movement.

IV. Conclusion

The first part of this paper focused on definitions and concepts of social movements as a theoretical embedding of the subject. It was shown how the perception of social movements changed over time, and that notions of social change, conflict, sharing, identity, collective action and autonomy are central to the analysis of contentious politics. In addition, the concepts of resource mobilization, political opportunity structures and framing were presented, and critical concerns depicted.

The second part of the paper dealt with the mobilisation against the high cost of living in Burkina Faso that evolved after a food price crisis in February 2008. The background and the development of the resistance were portrayed, and conditions and circumstances for successful mobilization were discussed. The three theoretical concepts did indeed help in analysing the conditions, yet they need to be seen as entangled with each other and in context with other relevant factors that can contribute to explaining complex social processes.

Lastly, I concluded that in early phases of the resistance against the high cost of living riots took place that later evolved in organized forms of protests. However, these protests are in a wider time frame embedded in phenomena of larger social movements.

Some very last aspects I would still like to highlight here are that it should be of priority to social movements to not only press for change, but also to plan alternatives. Furthermore, we should remind ourselves that forms of critical opposition and resistance in several African countries have been neutralized partly with means of repression by the ones in power and partly with approval or even support from European governments (Eberlei 2014: 3f). Against this backdrop of state hegemony and unequal power relations, cases of effective political action like the protests in Burkina Faso give reason for hope. Looking at theories, the old ones still seem to have a say, yet we should give room for context and place specific concepts to evolve. Although some theories seem universally applicable when embedded in their respective contexts, it would be of significant value to have more theories coming from researchers from the Global South. Generally, when talking about the value of different theories and concepts in social movement studies, I think we should also ask ourselves what exactly it is that we want to find out with them and for which intentions. Do we want to study and understand social movements, because we also want to see social change happening around us and we would like to contribute to more effective collective action and self-empowerment? We should be aware that we are and cannot and maybe even should not be free of our own interests as researchers and of the purposes we pursue research with.

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