

Examining social movement strategies for social-ecological transformation when facing criminal power

Strategic flexibility as a key to transformation in nonideal socio-political contexts?

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Research group: Environmental Governance

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Project description

Academic rationale and aims

Existing research suggests that social movements can influence the urgently needed social-ecological transformation of society by engaging with the state. However, this is premised on an unrealistic expectation of the state's ability to pursue the public good (e.g., social justice, sustainability) and uphold an overall lawful political process that movements can leverage. In fact, a common form of governance worldwide entails state and criminal actors such as mafias, drug cartels and paramilitaries, symbiotically benefitting from power sharing and economic extraction. For example, hundreds of environmental defenders and social movement leaders are killed every year in Latin America alone, largely at the hands of armed criminal actors.

Social movements cannot avoid positioning themselves strategically; by not doing so, they likely suffer additional co-optation, intimidation, repression, or outright control from the state or criminal power. However, we know little about the ways in which social movements modulate strategies to effect social-ecological transformation when facing criminal power.

Concerning the strategy of collaboration, which is the focus of this project, scholarship on Latin American and European movements has discussed the possibility for social movements to pursue, and to some degree achieve, transformational objectives by engaging the state, even in contexts in which the state itself operates in symbiosis or collusion with criminal actors. This involves, for example, modulating the degree of autonomy for the sake of achieving gains, the use of brokerage, clientelism, and compromises, the ability to develop collective oppositional identities that remain embedded in conventional political processes, the use of multiple alternative strategies simultaneously and iteratively, 'militant particularisms' that can be channelled through state governance processes, 'critical collaboration', or 'ethical congruency' combined with 'transformative pragmatism'. A common thread across these contributions, which this project will crucially explore, is social movements' attempt to balance engagement with (and hence influence on) the state, and their transformative capability through a calculated, albeit often experimental, strategic flexibility that includes outright disengagement when core movement values and integrity are threatened. In other words, the attempt to compromise without losing -and possibly even gaining - transformative capability.

It becomes crucial, then, for social movements to design, adapt, and possibly combine strategies to control their (dis)engagement with criminal power within and beyond the state, thus defending their transformative capability. Building on these insights, this project asks the following research questions:

- How do social movements relate to criminal power within, through, and beyond the state, by designing, and adapting forms of collaboration with the state?
- What are the similarities and differences between different social movement strategies to deal with criminal power while collaborating with the state for social-ecological transformation?
- Do the diversity of state configurations, and different manifestations of criminal power within, through and beyond the state matter for social movements' strategic choices? If so, how?

The Bright Minds Assistant will explore these questions by conducting a literature review in fields such as environmental governance, sustainability transitions and transformation, and social movement studies. Very few studies have addressed how social movements for sustainability transitions and transformation deal with criminal power. Therefore, the challenge in this project is to identify, select analyse and distil insights from published studies in which this problem is treated marginally and/or contextually.

Specifically, the Bright Minds Assistant will engage in the following research activities in collaboration with the supervisor:

1. Familiarize themselves with relevant literature on social movements, grassroots-led sustainability transitions and transformations, and environmental governance.
2. Development of an analytical framework.
3. Data analysis:
 - a. Data preparation (transcription, organization)
 - b. Coding
 - c. Analysis of coded material
4. Contribution to writing up of:
 - a. Journal article (co-authorship) to be submitted to a peer-reviewed journal (e.g., *Social Movement Studies*, *Environment and Planning C*, or *Earth System Governance*)
 - b. Short, non-academic output for a blog to be identified (e.g. Open Democracy; EADI Debating Development Research Blog).

Thus, this Bright Minds Assistantship will contribute to the emerging research agenda that aims to advance a novel understanding of the nature of, and pathways to social movement impact in nonideal socio-political contexts.

I will work closely with the Bright Minds Assistant through (bi)weekly meetings. Flexible work arrangements combining home and office work (at the Uithof campus) are possible.

For any enquiries about this position, send an email to g.feola@uu.nl

Job requirements

I am looking for a highly motivated and talented student with attention to detail. A strong interest in the topic of grassroots/civil society/community-led sustainability initiatives is a must, along with an affinity to an interdisciplinary approach to research at the intersection between environmental governance (especially autonomous governance), sustainability transitions and transformations, and social movement studies. The ideal candidate has strong organizational and communication skills in intercultural settings, is proficient in the use of MS Office, and has excellent English communication skills. Knowledge of Spanish, French and/or Portuguese is a plus.