

Power, Politics and Popular Mobilisation

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In his book, *The Rebirth of History* (2012), Alain Badiou observed that “we find ourselves in a time of riots”. Paying attention to contemporary popular uprisings allows us to take the pulse of the street; homing in on people’s grievances and desires, how they conflict and temporarily converge, and how they counter or correspond with formal discourse. Popular mobilisation is a political process whose primary locus is outside formal spaces: it is often low level – even underground – and only sometimes tumultuous. Contentious politics builds on the streets, in markets and along corridors; in sitting rooms, meeting halls and religious spaces; it is online and offline; and it is local and global. A mix of ideas and action, it is fermented in exchanges of talk and image and sharpened by arguments, demonstrations and public performances.

People mobilise as collectives of different kinds – as rioters, social movements, informal groups, members of the public, specific identities or simply as people. They may believe that the current social order is unfair or be imagining a better future for themselves or others. Very often claims are made to governments in response to governmental action or inaction, for example against taxes or corruption, or in favour of justice for particular causes. Claims are also made of other bodies, such as private companies or of society itself. The causes of popular mobilisation often have roots in expectations among less privileged people about how the economy should treat them with a minimum level of dignity and rights: the moral economy. A rupture in the moral economy can lead to uprisings or movements to protect people’s hold on land or jobs. On the other hand, mobilisations such as campus campaigns or mass demonstrations can be generated by a sense of outrage among middle classes who call for change in the social and political order.



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Popular mobilisation involves a challenge of power. Power mobilises and tranquillises, encourages and restrains, joins together and splits apart. The process of mobilisation means that the power of existing structures and agencies is called into question and transformed into unstable, but exciting, moments of high potential – new ideas, new identities, and new rules may all emerge. However, the structures and agencies that emerge are often quite different from those the participants had anticipated. True popular mobilisations are not directed by political leaders or elites (though they may be co-opted); rather they tend to have multiple points of leadership from within the populace. As a result the mobilisation tends to be unpredictable, even volatile. Popular mobilisations often pose a real or imagined threat to powerful establishments. Unless the state or other authority has created mechanisms to channel popular claims or to suppress them, mobilisations can grow rapidly and uncontrollably and often generate harsh responses.

Supporting longer-term processes of active citizenship, deep rooted civil society alliances and state empowerment of citizens is a vital development intervention. However, responding to unpredictable explosions of popular consciousness may be unrealistic; to engage usefully with popular mobilisation requires prior understanding of the often deep-rooted processes of power and political change underway.

Key readings

Tilly and Tarrow draw attention to the operations of contentious politics and explain how members of the public make claims on authorities using *performances and repertoires*. Horn focuses on the politics and practices of women's and feminist movements, finding gendered forms of counter-culture and alternative ways of understanding and enacting power in mobilisation. Chatterjee introduces the idea of *political society* as the environment of popular politics and shows how people living precarious lives are often dependent on quasi-legal forms of political participation. Hossain and co-authors bring our attention to *the moral economy* and its role in popular protests. Khanna and co-authors introduce *unruly politics*, offering a radical view of political action beyond the confines of our normal understanding of politics and institutions. Finally, Green explores popular mobilisation as '*active citizenship*', pointing to what external agencies can do.

Reading 1: Tilly, C. and Tarrow, S. (2007). Making claims. In: *Contentious politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1-24
<http://bit.ly/1KuEecG>

Reading 2: Horn, J. (2013). Introduction. In: *Gender and social movements: Overview report*. Brighton, UK: BRIDGE Programme.
<http://docs.bridge.ids.ac.uk/vfile/upload/4/document/1401/FULL%20REPORT.pdf#page=24>

Reading 3: Chatterjee, P. (2004). The politics of the governed. In: *The politics of the governed: Reflections on popular politics in most of the world*. New York: Columbia University Press, 53-78
<http://abahlali.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Partha-Chatterjee-The-Politics-of-the-Governed-Reflections-on-Popular-Politics-in-Most-of-the-World-2006-2.pdf#page=68>

Reading 4: Hossain, N.; Scott-Villiers, P.; & Joshi, A. et. al. (2014). *Them belly full (but we hungry): Food rights struggles in Bangladesh, India, Kenya and Mozambique*. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies.
<https://www.ids.ac.uk/files/dmfile/SynthesisReportVI-ForDigital.pdf#page=9>

Reading 5: Khanna, A.; Mani, P.; & Patterson, Z. et. al. (2013). The changing faces of citizen action: A mapping study through an 'unruly' lens. *IDS Working Papers 2013* (423), 13-38
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2040-0209.2013.00423.x/epdf#page=13>

Reading 6: Green, D. (December 2014). *Citizen mobilisation and empowerment*. Malta: Kapuscinski Development Lecture.
<http://kapuscinskilectures.eu/lectures/citizen-mobilisation-and-empowerment-in-development/>

Questions to guide reading

- What effects do intersectionalities of identity (such as gender, race, class, age, wealth etc.) have on people's involvement in popular mobilisation?
- What happens when popular mobilisations yield to agreements with the state or other authorities?
- How does the private sector play a role in popular mobilisation and its politics?
- How do the media, authorities and scholars romanticise, over-simplify or vilify multitudes and their causes?
- What are the policy and practice issues that arise from the *process* of popular mobilisation (rather than from its claims)?
- What does this mean for your own efforts to support positive social change?