

Empire and Social Movements

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The CVE Roundtable

Presenter

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Moderator

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Discussants

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This product presents a summary of the CVE Roundtable.

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With the decline of citizenship and the collapse of democracy in the United States, the importance of social movements becomes very profound. However, the difficulty has always been in the transformation of social movements into organized and sustained political action. In this way Professor Carl Boggs (National University in Los Angeles) presented the major problems facing social movements in the United States. In his talk for the Center for Values and Ethics' roundtable on May 24, 2010, Boggs discussed with experts from South Korea on the topic of "Empire and Social Movements."

His presentation looked at the way in which social movements evolve and respond to today's global challenges. As portraying the United States that shows political apathy and a decline of citizenship, social movements face many difficulties. With his presentation, Boggs sought to answer the following questions: how has citizenship in the United States declined and what are its impacts? What are the main challenges facing the world which social movements must address? In what way can social movements become more sustained political groupings?

Much of his analysis came from his previous works such as *Imperial Delusions: American Militarism and Endless War* and *The End of Politics: Corporate Power and the Decline of the Public Sphere*, as well as works by Antonio Gramsci and C. Wright Mills. From this he set out to show the rise and fall of social movements against the backdrop of empire, militarism, and capitalism.

The following is a summary of the presentation and the following discussion between Boggs and other participants.

Presentation

Phantom Democracy

Carl Boggs began his presentation by outlining the concept of "phantom democracy." This is the collapse of democracy in the United States and the rise of the military and corporations within politics. This has been evident in recent events such as the Gulf of Mexico oil spill and the passage of the Health Care Bill, both incidents have shown how the interests of corporations, in this case the oil and pharmaceutical industry respectively, have taken precedence. This is symptomatic of the rule of the "power elite" characterized by C. Wright Mills. The power elite forms today what can be broadly be described as "militarized state capitalism." This is to view the political system in the United States as [an] integrated elite [bloc] which encompasses the military, corporations, and the government. All three are the same, forming together a militarized state capitalism that differs from the state capitalism that can be observed in China. Because of the far reaching nature of this system through the global dominance of the United States in every area, it becomes a major global challenge that affects people around the world. In what way has this manifested itself?

Global Challenges

The outcome of such power elite and phantom democracy is the emergence of five interrelated problems that require urgent action. Because of the magnitude and scale of these problems, Boggs suggested that there is no time for business as usual. These five problems include:

1) *American Empire and Militarism* Since the end of World War II, a permanent war economy has developed in the United States that

dominated the political system.

2) *Corporate Power* The power of corporations and their influence through lobbying has strengthened their position to control the political landscape. The immense power of the corporations has nullified civil society.

3) *Corporate Globalization* This is the globalization of capital that takes away from people citizenship. Global capitalism is stronger and more flexible than local communities, so that local issues are increasingly marginalized.

4) *Global Ecological Crisis* Global warming is just a small part of this crisis. It is also the depletion of energy resources and the destruction of nature.

5) *Decline of Citizenship* There has been a general decline of citizenship and citizen participation at the global level.

These five problems constitute a major crisis in the world and the difficulty in addressing these issues comes from the devaluation of citizenship. This loss of citizenship by the power of oligarch rule was recently highlighted by the Iraq War in which social movements failed to stop the invasion of Iraq. This failure of social movements can best be summarized by an examination of the movements.

Failure of Social Movements

Carl Boggs outlined the main social movements in the United States that have set out for change but have failed to develop this into political action.

1) *The Environmental Movement* This has been one of the largest movements of the last 30 years and has had different results in moving from a social movement to a political one. It has though faced tough opposition from the established political order.

2) *Anti-globalization Movement* What started out during the late 1990s, rose to prominence

with the protests at the Seattle World Trade Organization meeting in 1999. There had been a lot of hope that the movement would develop into a sustained political group. However, this movement soon faded away.

3) *Anti-War Movement* Specifically the movement against the war in Iraq. This was a broad movement that was very active and brought together different social groups. However, Boggs commented that the anti-war movement today is dead.

4) *Immigration Rights Movement* This is a single issue movement and as such has problems in becoming a sustained political movement.

These examples all show the failure of social movements through varying ways but showing similar symptoms. In effect, their failure hints at the problem of social movements' participation in politics itself. What are the key characteristics of politics? Boggs outlined three characteristics that include ideology, strategy, and organization. Reflecting upon these social movements, they have failed to utilize these characteristics to develop their movements into political forces. Particularly, in the case of strategy, there has been a great absence of strategy in these social movements. Furthermore, these movements have lacked sustainability and partly reflect the lack of interest in politics in the United States. The focus in the United States tends to be on the moment and not on a sustained movement. Boggs recognized the need for structure and longevity in transforming social movements into political action.

What are the prospects for developing social movements? Boggs presented three ways in which social movements can enter into the political spectrum. The first is the example of Western Europe, where social movements like the Greens have transformed themselves into political forces. The Greens became involved in electoral politics but they were rooted in the social movements of peace, environment, women's rights and others, these kinds of movements were known as "Citizen's Initiatives." A second similarly related example

is social democracy which consists of adding a human element to capitalism. This happened to the Greens later on in Germany as they became involved in politics. The final example is that of Gramsci's notion of a "Cultural Revolution" or Jacobinism, where time is a crucial concept in politics and there is the need to act. This kind of thought has been the inspiration for revolutions in 20th century whether in Russia or Algeria.

Considering the urgency of the crisis outlined by Boggs, especially that related to global warming and the environment, a revolution of urgent action will be the way for social movements to go forward. Here Boggs draws upon Gramsci, Jacobinism, and also Lenin. There is a moral and political imperative for action now. The luxury of muddling through is not there anymore. Despite this, Boggs accepts that a revolutionary approach will not work in the complex societies of today. What is clear is that there is a need for people to think and become more involved in politics.

Discussion

Social Movements in South Korea

The presentation by Boggs focused mainly on social movements within the United States and Western Europe. Turning to South Korea, the discussion focused on the progress of social movements and the transformation of them into political action. Part of this evolves out of the different perceptions of the United States in South Korean society. One of the discussants reflected on this point that relates to the generational gap in South Korea. While for most Koreans it is generally accepted that the United States acted out of self interest when it became involved in the Korean Peninsula, Washington still tried to develop democracy in a meaningful way as bulwark against communism. The aim was to develop a deep-rooted democracy that would prevent people going back to socialism or communism. In this way, empire and democracy can coincide with one another.

For the older generations in Korea, who

had direct experience with the United States during the Korean War, they are more grateful to America for defending South Korea. This reflects differently with the younger generations who did not have a similar experience and are more skeptical of the United States. The recent example of this is the so-called 386 generation¹ that was a social movement that entered politics. This generation epitomized the skepticism toward the United States prevalent among the younger generation who viewed the United States as acting like an empire through its support for the military dictatorships of the past. They entered politics with the election of President Kim Dae-Jung in 1998 and remained in power until the end of the Roh Moo-hyun administration in 2007. While they came in with hopes for change, the 386 generation made few changes, save for voting against the Iraq War. In this regard, the discussant raised the question of how are social movements to enter politics without becoming co-opted by it. The dilemma for social movements is that if you enter politics you will become part of the system, but if you are to remain out of politics you will become marginalized and simply classed as radicals.

Boggs agreed that this has been a major problem for social movements and stated that it is also true for labor and civil rights groups in the United States. Of particular note is the green movement, which has had different approaches toward entering politics. Some groups within the movement have resisted this, such as Earth First and Greenpeace but there has been little success with the greens.

Global Social Movements

What has been evident with social movements across the globe has been the lack of coordination, particularly with the wide range of global issues. The problems presented by Boggs in his presentation were partly domestic problems for the United States but also

¹ The 386 generation derives its name from those who were born in the 60s, attended university in the 80s, and were generally in their 30s when they entered politics. This group tends to be more progressive.

global problems. American empire, globalization, and the global ecological crisis require the solutions from global social movements. However one of the participants noted that global social movements have tended to not be very successful. One of the core reasons for this failure of social movements had been the problem of coordination and cohesion between different groups in different countries. The participant wanted to know how it would be possible to make a global movement more effective.

Boggs pointed out that it can be difficult to bring together social movements across the globe when the issues are not perceived as directly affecting their interests. For example, U.S. involvement in Afghanistan would motivate groups in the United States and in the Middle East, but it would be harder for groups in other countries less affected to be more motivated. The one threat to the world which is truly perceived as a direct threat to everyone is the global ecological crisis. Boggs identified this as the main problem for the world and one that can unite social movements across the globe. Still, the main problem for cohesion amongst movements around the world is logistics. It is difficult for people to travel around the world and to sustain the movement. It is the opposite of global capitalism, which has the resources to move people around.

Recently some people have commented that following the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, global social movements are becoming stronger and developing into a political movement. However, Boggs disagreed with this perception and believes that these social movements have yet to become sustained action that would characterize it as political action.

Conclusion

Social movements tend to be big, loud, militant, and seek to gain attention. The transformation of these movements into political action though has not been successful. Carl Boggs presented an overview of the challenges

the world faces, the major social movements, and how to make political action more sustained. One of the main difficulties that he identified was the apathy of people, particularly in the United States, toward politics. The focus is always on the moment and not on a sustained movement. Boggs highlighted the need for structure, strategy, and longevity in order for social movements to transform into political forces. Considering the major challenges that threaten the world, particularly with climate change there is little time to act. In politics, time is a concept and Boggs pushed for some revolutionary changes.

The participants agreed somewhat with Boggs' assessment on social movements and offered a similar view of the movements within South Korean society. It was recognized that entering politics results in institutionalization of a movement as well as a "watering down" of the original political objectives. The course of the 386 generation in South Korea exemplifies this very well. Boggs put forward the proposal that a political movement requires strategy and sustainability if it is to have any serious impact on making revolutionary changes.■

——— *Carl E. Boggs is Professor of Sociology at National University in Los Angeles.*

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