



# Social Movements (Latin America)

*Social movements are committed to advocating popular, grassroots interests to the government and the dominant culture in general. Although social movements are comprised of non-state actors who respond to immediate and specific concerns, in Latin America efforts to realize sustainable forms of development have become intertwined with the policy initiatives of leftist governments that share common goals of social justice and empowerment.*

**S**ocial movements are groups of individuals or organizations that advocate for political or social change. Sometimes called *popular movements* because of their roots in subordinate populations, these movements typically challenge holders of power from the dominant sectors of society. Often they focus on the realization of civil or social rights and emerge in response to an immediate and specific crisis. Social movements are typically part of civil society and are known as “non-state actors.” Rather than engaging in electoral campaigns or armed struggles with the goal of gaining direct control over governmental structures, social movements typically have more limited goals of influencing specific policies. Their force is often through an expression of numbers, commitment, and unity.

## New Social Movements

In the 1990s sociologists began to speak of new social movements (NSMs) in order to distinguish them from older social movements that were typically rooted in traditional political parties, labor unions, or guerrilla insurgencies. Rather than engaging in a project of historical transformation aimed at controlling state structures, researchers interpreted NSMs as responding

to specific crises with more focused and limited demands. While the old movements were commonly rooted in a Marxist understanding of class struggle, NSMs embraced the identity politics that emphasized issues of autonomy and democracy. Examples of new sociocultural actors engaging in these organizing efforts included gender rights and women’s rights organizations, neighborhood organizations, human rights advocates, ecological activists, families of political prisoners and the disappeared, and advocates for indigenous peoples’ rights and autonomy. (The preferred style throughout this encyclopedia is to lowercase the word “indigenous,” but some authors [this author included] prefer the word to be capitalized. The word is kept lowercase here for consistency.) Initially, environmental concerns were just one of many issues, but media focus on climate change brought increased attention to the topic and related concerns including large-scale extractive mining and the consequences of petroleum-based economies. These concerns brought a sustainability discourse to the forefront.

Many scholars, including the Canadian professor of social and political science Judith Adler Hellman (1995), have challenged what researchers see as an artificial division between old and new movements. In particular, leftist scholars challenged an implicitly conservative ideological agenda in much of the research on NSMs, including an apparent desire to dismiss social class as a tool of analysis. The US economic and political anthropologist Marc Edelman (1999, 19–20), for example, notes that “old social movements” had not entirely ignored identity politics, and “new” movements had not discarded a class consciousness. Rather, these scholars urge the importance of considering how various forms of identity (including class, ethnicity, and gender) have interacted with each other in specific historical contexts.

Furthermore, activist undertakings that scholars championed as classic examples of new social movements engaged in the types of strategies and pressure tactics commonly associated with “old” social movements, including street demonstrations, electoral campaigns, and mass mobilizations specifically targeted to remove governments from power. Rather than solely engaging in class struggles or embracing the limited goals of identity politics, both the old and new movements repeatedly crossed these imaginary boundaries in order to transform hegemonic structures.

Initially, many scholars assumed that identity-based movements were compatible with neoliberalism because of their limited demands, and often conservative governments pursued policies based on that assumption. In what critics denounced as “multicultural neoliberalism,” governments conceded ground on cultural issues such as recognition of indigenous languages and bilingual education programs, while simultaneously refusing to grant material benefits such as agrarian reform, increased wages, or housing (Hale 2002). Subsequent political events in the first decade of the twenty-first century challenged the assumptions of new social movement theory. Movements that scholars had interpreted as rooted in apolitical organizations with a loose hierarchy challenged exclusionary neoliberal governments. As class-based labor movements and political parties had previously sought to do, these new movements also opened up political spaces, articulated popular demands, and politicized issues (such as gender rights) that formerly had been confined to the private realm. Even the fundamental goals, strategies, and pressure tactics of NSMs remained similar to earlier movements in terms of engaging in demonstrations, strikes, and marches in order to wrestle concessions from the government.

## Madres de la Plaza de Mayo

The Madres (Mothers) of the Plaza de Mayo was a group of women whose children “disappeared” during the Argentine military dictatorship’s dirty war against political dissidents between 1976 and 1983. Frustrated

with an endless search for their children, on 20 April 1977 the mothers gathered at the Plaza de Mayo in central Buenos Aires. The women publicly denounced the military government for their role in the disappearances of their sons and daughters. The mothers called for a public accounting of the reign of terror and punishment for those responsible for the crimes. These women departed from their gendered domestic spheres to play a decidedly visible and public role in denouncing human rights abuses. In a highly charged and repressive political environment, they employed their traditional roles as mothers as a mechanism of protest.

Scholars commonly depicted the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo as a classic example of a new social movement because they organized outside the structures of political parties and used their position as mothers for the limited and defined goal of freeing their children. As their struggle matured, however, they assumed more radical positions and began to engage broader political concerns. The mothers felt responsible to carry on their children’s political work and advance the agenda that originally led to their disappearance. Furthermore, the experience of these women challenged the myth that motherhood is safe from political repression. When the women stepped outside their traditional and preassigned gender roles, they faced the same viciousness of repressive state apparatuses as did male dissidents. Away from the public eye, military officials often used the most brutal tools of rape and torture on dissident women.



## Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra

Brazil’s Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST; Landless Workers’ Movement) was one of Latin America’s largest social movements and is an example of one that bridged the artificial divide between old and new movements. It formed in the late 1970s to defend the rights and lives of peasants who had been expelled from their lands. With 1.5 million members, the MST came to operate throughout much of Brazil. It was organized on an autonomous and nonhierarchical model in which grassroots members made decisions through discussion,

reflection, and consensus. The MST had an eclectic ideology but was broadly governed by two basic principles: a struggle for land in order to diminish a bad quality of life in the city and to produce food, and a commitment to regaining dignity and cultural values, with freedom and liberty as the basis for a good society. The MST argued that land is part of nature and should belong to those who work it. They engaged in land occupations as a strategy to pressure the government for positive policy changes, including an agrarian reform that included access to land, health care, education, dignity, infrastructure, water, housing, and support for the young to stay on the land. More important than property rights was a true agrarian reform that would facilitate forms of production that would lead to food security and sovereignty. The MST opposed the use of biotech crops, chemical pesticides, and fertilizers because it gave more power to multinational corporations and took control out of the hands of the local farmers. Production was based on the principle “from each according to their ability, to each according to their effort.” Their struggle was not just for themselves but for future generations as well.

The MST was part of the *Via Campesina* (Spanish for “Peasants’ Way”), an international movement of about 150 organizations in 70 countries that represented about 200 million farmers from around the world. The *Via Campesina* was founded in 1993 to create a mechanism through which family farmers could make their voices heard in international debates on agricultural policies that directly affected their lives. The *Via Campesina* opposed corporate-driven agriculture that destroyed the environment and defended small-scale sustainable agriculture as a way to promote social justice and dignity. In 1996 the *Via Campesina* proposed the concept of food sovereignty as the right of communities to produce healthy food on their own land rather than engaging in patterns of neoliberal export economies that contributed to poverty and climate crises. The movement in particular defended women’s rights and gender equality.

## Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador

Activists formed the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE; Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador) in 1986 with the goal of joining all indigenous peoples in the country into one large movement to defend their concerns and to agitate for social, political, and educational reforms. CONAIE’s central and most controversial demand was to revise the constitution to recognize the “plurinational” character of Ecuador in order to incorporate the contributions of diverse populations into state structures, a

proposal that elites repeatedly rejected as undermining the unity and integrity of the country. The movement’s success in unifying and advancing an indigenous agenda gained it a reputation as one of the best-organized social movements in the Americas (Becker 2011).

In June 1990 CONAIE emerged at the forefront of a powerful uprising that paralyzed the country for a week. Indigenous activists blocked roads with boulders, rocks, and trees that paralyzed the transport system, effectively cutting off the food supply to the cities and shutting down the country. Frustrated by stagnated talks with the government over bilingual education, agrarian reform, and demands to recognize the plurinational nature of Ecuador, the uprising forced the government to negotiate their demands. CONAIE repeatedly led subsequent popular protests for land, economic development, education, and recognition of Indigenous nationalities.

In a shift in strategies from a focus on civil society to one on electoral campaigns, in 1995 CONAIE helped form the political movement Pachakutik to campaign for political office. Pachakutik identified itself as part of a new Latin American left that embraced principles of community, solidarity, unity, tolerance, and respect. Pachakutik opposed neoliberal economic policies and favored a more inclusive and participatory political system. In January 2000 indigenous leaders allied with lower-ranking military officials in a short-lived coup that removed president Jamil Mahuad from power after he had implemented unpopular neoliberal economic policies. What had once been seen as a primary example of a new social movement had shifted its strategy from organizing broad sectors of civil society to engaging in activities more representative of traditional political actors.

## World Social Forum

From its first meeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001, the World Social Forum (WSF) quickly grew into the world’s largest meeting of civil society. From an assembly of 10,000 people (mostly from Latin America, France, and Italy) in 2001 who gathered to talk about creating a “globalization from below,” the WSF grew dramatically, with 50,000 gathering in 2002; 100,000 meeting in 2003 and 2004; and 155,000 in 2005. With the slogan “Another World Is Possible,” the forum featured speakers, workshops, panels, debates, marches, and cultural events. It provided an open platform for activists to discuss strategies of resistance to neoliberal globalization and to present constructive alternatives. Community organizers, trade unionists, young people, academics, and others met to rethink and recreate globalization so that it would benefit people, putting human rights, social justice, and ecological sustainability before profits.

The World Social Forum had its roots in earlier organizing efforts such as the 1992 Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and the First International Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism that the Zapatistas organized in Chiapas, Mexico, in 1996. Porto Alegre was a logical and favorable location for the WSF to meet, both because of municipal support from the governing leftist Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT; Workers Party) that was rooted in a history of trade unions and social movement organizing, and because its practice of participatory budgeting formed a positive model for civil society.

The WSF also provided an arena for perennial discussions regarding the relationship between civil society and political parties in organizing a social movement. With an emphasis on civil society, the WSF excluded political parties and military organizations from its discussions. With the rise of new left governments in Latin America during the first decade of the twenty-first century, many activists began to rethink the relationship between social movements and political parties. Although political parties could not mobilize massive demonstrations the way social movements can, social movements could not implement positive policy changes as governments can.

## “Pink Tide” Governments and Extractive Industries

In 1998 Hugo Chávez won election as president of Venezuela, introducing a decade during which almost all of the South American countries subsequently elected “pink tide” governments with leftist tendencies. Chávez realized success through his appeals to the interests of marginalized sectors of society as he built what he called a Bolivarian revolution, which used Venezuela’s petroleum wealth to redirect resources to the lower sectors of society.

Chávez represented the interplay between and merging of new and old movements. He was a career military officer, one of the few avenues for social advancement available to common people in Latin America. Chávez first burst on the political scene after a failed military-civilian coup d’état against the elected government of Carlos Andrés Pérez on 4 February 1992. The coup failed, but Chávez leveraged that exposure into his successful electoral campaign. Once in office, he challenged neoliberal governance by halting privatization, expanding social spending for education and health care, and increasing civil rights for women and marginalized peoples. While opponents derided Chávez for his authoritarian style of governance, he used governing structures to open significant spaces for grassroots social movements.

Chávez and other left-populist governments that followed him in Latin America funded their expansion of

social spending through the extraction of natural resources. Leftist critics complained that pursuing such policies failed to establish a fundamental break with previous export-dependent economies. Environmental and social movement activists criticized the unsustainable nature of these policies, as well as the fact that local communities that bore the brunt of these endeavors rarely shared in their benefits. Protests against mineral extraction spread across the Americas, with both left and right governments arguing that large-scale mining was preferable to the alternatives because it was less ecologically damaging than small-scale artisanal mining.

In 2006 Bolivia’s foreign minister, David Choquehuanca, introduced the *sumak kawsay* as a Quechua concept of living well, not just living better. Rather than focusing on material accumulation, it sought to build a sustainable economy. This perspective included an explicit critique of traditional development strategies that increased the use of resources instead of living in harmony with others and with nature. Rather than a neoliberal emphasis on individual and property rights, the *sumak kawsay* emphasized collective community interests. It entailed a new way of thinking about human relations that was not based on exploitation, and instead required a new relationship between economy and nature. Social movements embraced these ideas as a way to regain control over state structures to use them for the common good rather than for the profits of wealthy capitalists.

In one of many examples of the tensions between leftist governments and social movements, indigenous groups in Bolivia in 2011 marched against government plans to build a highway through the Isiboro-Sécure Indigenous Territory and National Park (TIPNIS) ecological reserve. Evo Morales, himself an indigenous person who leveraged his credentials as a leader of Bolivia’s powerful social movements to election to the presidency in 2005, pressed for construction of the road because it was key to Bolivia’s economic development. At first Morales refused to listen to protests that the road would destroy one of the world’s most biodiverse regions, but social movement pressure forced him to change his policies. Leftist governments and social movements continued a complicated dance to realize mutual objectives of sustainable development that would benefit all peoples.

Marc BECKER

*Truman State University*

*See also* Amazonia; Bogotá, Colombia; Brazil; Central America; Corporate Accountability; Ecovillages; Fair Trade; Gender Equality; Guatemala City; Labor; Mexico City; Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs); North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); Organization of American States (OAS); Rio de Janeiro,

Brazil; Rio Earth Summit (UN Conference on Environment and Development); Rural Development (the Americas); Southern Cone

### FURTHER READING

- Baud, Michiel, & Rutten, Rosanne. (Eds.). (2004). *Popular intellectuals and social movements: Framing protest in Asia, Africa, and Latin America*. New York: Published for the International Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, Amsterdam, by Cambridge University Press.
- Becker, Marc. (2011). *Pachakutik: Indigenous movements and electoral politics in Ecuador*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Dangl, Benjamin. (2010). *Dancing with dynamite: States and social movements in Latin America*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.
- Deere, Carmen Diana, & Royce, Frederick S. (Eds.). (2009). *Rural social movements in Latin America: Organizing for sustainable livelihoods*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Eckstein, Susan. (Ed.). (1989). *Power and protest: Latin American social movements*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Edelman, Marc. (1999). *Peasants against globalization: Rural social movements in Costa Rica*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Escobar, Arturo. (2010). Latin America at a crossroads. *Cultural Studies*, 24(1), 1–65.
- Fisher, William F., & Ponniah, Thomas. (Eds.). (2003). *Another world is possible: Popular alternatives to globalization at the World Social Forum*. London & New York: Zed Books.
- Foweraker, Joe. (1995). *Theorizing social movements*. Boulder, CO: Pluto Press.
- Hale, Charles R. (2002). Does multiculturalism menace? Governance, cultural rights and the politics of identity in Guatemala. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 34(3), 485–524.
- Harris, Richard L., & Nef, Jorge. (Eds.). (2008). *Capital, power, and inequality in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hellman, Judith Adler. (1995). The riddle of new social movements: Who they are and what they do. In Sandor Halebsky & Richard L. Harris (Eds.), *Capital, power, and inequality in Latin America* (pp. 165–183). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Jaffee, Daniel. (2007). *Brewing justice: Fair trade coffee, sustainability, and survival*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Miller, Francesca. (1991). *Latin American women and the search for social justice*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.
- Petras, James, & Veltmeyer, Henry. (2011). *Social movements in Latin America: Neoliberalism and popular resistance*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Prevost, Gary; Campos, Carlos Oliva; & Vanden, Harry E. (Eds.). (2012). *Social movements and leftist governments in Latin America: Confrontation or co-option?* London: Zed Books.
- Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. (2010). *Voices of the world*. London: Verso.
- Smith, Jackie, et al. (2008). *Global democracy and the World Social Forums*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Stahler-Sholk, Richard, & Vanden, Harry E. (2011). A second look at Latin American social movements. *Latin American Perspectives*, 38(1), 5–13.
- Stahler-Sholk, Richard; Vanden, Harry E.; & Kuecker, Glen. (Eds.). (2008). *Latin American social movements in the twenty-first century: Resistance, power, and democracy*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Webber, Jeffery. (2011). *From rebellion to reform in Bolivia: Class struggle, indigenous liberation, and the politics of Evo Morales*. New York: Haymarket Books.
- Wolford, Wendy. (2010). *This land is ours now: Social mobilization and the meanings of land in Brazil*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Zibechi, Raúl. (2010). *Dispersing power: Social movements as anti-state forces*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.

