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Human Rights in Motion

Multipolarity

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ABSTRACT

In view of the recent worldwide wave of street protests challenging current modes of democratic representation, and drawing on the author's years of experience leading the NGO Conectas Human Rights, along with conversations held with partners in Brazil and other countries, this article mulls over human rights organisations' stance and role in the 21st century. Such street mobilisations point to the diversification of actors and struggles, mistrust in public institutions, and the empowerment of the individual as a political actor. In this article, the author briefly discusses: (i) the context of multiple struggles, interlocutors, and levels of action to be engaged in by human rights organisations; (ii) how these organisations are related to the crises of representation and effectiveness of State institutions; and (iii) how they interact with and strengthen individuals as activists and political actors. By drawing on the distinctions between organisational activism and selfactivism, it points to the need for human rights organisations to strike a balance between their solid presence with long-term mindset, and fluidity to adapt and take advantage of the opportunities that contemporary society provides.

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ESSAY

SOLID ORGANISATIONS IN A LIQUID WORLD

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> *(…) Change is the only permanence, and uncertainty the only certainty. A hundred years ago, 'to be modern' meant to chase 'the final state of perfection' – now it means an infinity of improvements, with no 'final state' in sight and none desired.*
>
> (Zygmunt Bauman, Liquid Modernity, 2012)

"You people are the before and the after of the streets." That was the response I got from Bruno Torturra, the journalist now well-known for transmitting live, from his mobile phone, the Brazilian protests that mobilised millions, as of June 2013. We had been talking about the future of human rights organisations – solid, professional – that seemed to have become dispensable overnight. A similar conversation was taking place at the table beside ours, among people who seemed to belong to political parties, trade unions or other civil society entities. We were asking ourselves about the role of organisations that seek social transformation in this increasingly agitated landscape.

I have no doubt that the struggle for rights is the best way to transform the world we live in and that continuous and persevering efforts from structured organisations are fundamental in this aim. The protests that recently spread across the world – from Cairo to Istanbul, from Madrid to Santiago, from Tunis to São Paulo and Bangkok – showed that hundreds of millions of people seek more just, dignified and humane societies. An analysis of recent protests in 90 countries demonstrates that "real democracy" is the major theme of those who took to the streets to demand change.[1]

It would be naïve to believe that the protests' infinite demands are all directly related to human rights and to minority rights. Nor do I believe that the fervent cries 'from the streets' signify a definitive break with the current forms of social organisation and their institutions. But what remains undeniable is that the recent mobilisations unlocked features ever more prevalent in contemporary society: the diversification of actors and struggles, unrest owing to certain aspects

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of public institutions and the empowerment of the individual as a political actor. Reflections on similar concerns have been commonplace in human rights organisations for at least a decade and have started to have significant impact on the goals, strategies and structures of these organisations.

Thus, in my mind, to reflect on the international human rights movement's perspectives in the 21st century, the subject of this anniversary edition of *Sur Journal*, means to analyse **three central issues:** (i) the context of multiple struggles, interlocutors, and levels of action to be engaged in by human rights organisations; (ii) how these organisations are related to the crises of representation and effectiveness of State institutions; and (iii) how these organisations interact with and strengthen individuals as activists and political actors. These issues are related to other questions for the present *Sur* issue, such as who we, as human rights organisations, represent; how to combine immediate concerns with long-term impacts; how new information and communication technologies influence activism; and whether the language of human rights is still effective for social change.

Any ambition of reaching conclusive answers would be, at the very least, premature. From the perspective of my experience as the head of Conectas Human Rights, I would only venture preliminary comments, anchored in the Brazilian reality and enriched by productive talks with partners from other countries.[2] The hope is to spur the debate in order to strengthen the impact of organisations who have been, and continue to be, essential in the construction of a more just world.

1 Multiplicity

Human rights organisations face a wide variety of options on which paths to follow and decisions to make. Flows of communication and information have, in unprecedented ways, accelerated our encounters with this multiplicity of struggles, interlocutors and levels of action.

Now, in addition to the traditional agenda of human rights organisations, such as freedom of expression and combating torture and discrimination, there is the need to defend 'new' rights. The right to the city is one example, which includes mobility and urban policies, or the right to privacy in the digital world and in relation to new technologies. The multiplicity of subjects and violations which organisations are called to act upon and which they can impact is enormous. Meanwhile, despite worthy successes in some areas, many of our historical struggles haven't been overcome, while our agendas grow increasingly broad and diversified every day.

This diversification occurs in relation to our interlocutors as well, who now include more than just the State. For instance, human rights organisations now have to deal with private business. For a long time we have known that commercial and financial interests are the source of abuses and violations. But the notion that private entities have obligations derived directly from international human rights norms is still an emerging debate (BILCHITZ, 2010). Added to this is the growing difficulty, often due to companies' transnational nature, of

finding the precise territory of their violations, in order to litigate if necessary. If a Chinese multinational firm, whose main businesses take place in Europe, uses public funding to commit violations in yet another region – such as the forced displacement of local communities in Angola – who is responsible?

Human rights organisations also face a multiplicity of choices on the scopes where to operate. There is an ever-growing tension between focusing fully and exclusively on national issues or expanding to include regional and international affairs. As with other issues, this isn't an easy choice. In certain cases we see that taking a stance that goes beyond national borders has become increasingly important. Think, just to illustrate, about an organisation that seeks to structurally impact the human rights issues in the 'war on drugs'. It is very likely that it must take into consideration the regional and international dimensions of the issue. That doesn't necessarily mean that it must act directly in different countries, but it will need to stay informed and maintain connections or partnerships. Otherwise it may not achieve the desired impact.

On the one hand, navigating this multiplicity of struggles, interlocutors and levels of action encourages organisations to constantly update, developing innovative strategies and rethinking old issues. On the other, however, it imposes several challenges, such as the difficulty of remaining faithful to the identity and mission of the institution, cultivating expertise and the necessary resources to expand its area of involvement, developing a healthy means of working in partnership with other institutions, combining short- and long-term action, among other issues.

2 Centre of gravity

A growing lack of trust may be felt nowadays as to the State's capacity to assure rights, as well as the difficulty of State institutions in modernising and continuing to serve their strategic roles in the complex societies in which we live (NOGUEIRA, 2014).

The very concept of the nation-state has come under attack, a consequence of the intensification of international movements and the emergence of issues that transcend national borders. Its power also wanes as that of other entities, private and non-governmental, grows.

But perhaps the greatest challenge comes from within these States' very societies, in a reaction to what are perceived as the failings of representative institutions. That is the case of the legislative system, for example, often held hostage by party politics that many citizens do not identify with (THE ECONOMIST, 2014). As the *indignados* in Spain say, "our dreams don't fit in your ballot boxes",[3] making this perceived failing even clearer. There is a wide gap between the promises that legitimate State institutions and that which they are truly capable of delivering.

This disillusionment with States' effectiveness challenges human rights organisations in at least two ways. The first, and most direct, concerns the risk that these organisations be seen by the population with the same distrust

they often have for public institutions, thus affecting their credibility. While serving as a channel of dialogue with a dysfunctional State apparatus, organisations can find their legitimacy compromised. The 2013 Confidence Barometer showed that, in Brazil, NGOs and the government are "less trustworthy" than the media and private corporations, in the opinion of those interviewed (EDELMAN, 2013).

And more importantly, a second challenge relates to the point of reference around which human rights organisations orbit. Rights comprise a grammar built around this logic, with the State as its 'centre of gravity', determining what the State should or not do. When the credibility of State institutions is put in check, human rights organisations feel their centre of gravity weakened.

I'm not saying that the State ought to abandon, or has already abandoned, its role as the main responsible party for guaranteeing rights and, therefore, the central focus of human rights organisations. But I can affirm that organisations can feel somewhat disoriented when the representative character and effectiveness of State institutions to guarantee these rights are severely questioned. Various effects in this sense can already be noted in certain strategies used by organisations, such as strategic litigation, legislative advocacy and the tools for influencing public policies.

3 Selfactivism

Historically, most if not all human rights organisations have sought to represent, or act for the sake of, vulnerable groups with specific interests, therefore constituting a means of participation in political life.

The empowerment of the individual as a central actor in contemporary society defies this logic. Today there is the perception that anyone can be one's own spokesperson and carry out deep social transformations, doing without institutions and their unified campaigns, organised demands and representation of common causes. For some, we live in a time of "hypermodernity" (LIPOVETSKY; CHARLES 2004) or "liquid modernity" (BAUMAN, 2001).

There thus emerges selfactivism – "authorial activism" (SILVA, 2013) or "multi-focused activism" (NOGUEIRA, 2014) – in which each individual simultaneously and ephemerally champions diverse causes. Alliances and relations with organisations are sporadic and intermittent, based on specific causes and not the totality of values and mission of an institution.

Digital activism, through social media and new means of communication, strengthens this phenomenon. "Where activists were once defined by their causes, they are now defined by their tools" (GLADWELL, 2010). On the one hand, this favours access to information and provides constant stimuli for taking positions. On the other, there is a dilution of long lasting or institutional connections that feed the perseverance necessary for long-term social transformation. They are, respectively, weak ties and strong ties (MCADAM, 1990; GLADWELL, 2010).

Creating typologies that define this new activism might seem like a contradiction in terms. The measure of its impact is also no easy task. However,

coming back to prior experiences with public protests and daring to define a certain notion of "ideal types", one might establish the comparisons as in Table 1.

Table 1

Differences between *organisational activism and selfactivism*

	organisational activism	*selfactivism*
Structure and hierarchy	Leadership and governance	No formal leadership
Demands	Indivisibility of rights	Fragmentation of causes
Processes	Planned	Spontaneous
Desired results	Structural changes	Urgent transformation
Network building	Off-line and lasting	On-line and intermittent
Stimuli	Recurring violations	Specific events
Timeframe	Long term	Short term
Representativeness	Collective causes	Individual self-representation
Language	Technical	Different narratives

It seems that human rights organisations today act and try to expand public support for their causes by transiting between organisational and independent activism, as tentatively characterised in the preceding table. In order to navigate this new landscape, it is essential that organisations understand the diverse nature of selfactivism – and I make no value judgement here. In selfactivism, decentralisation, fragmentation, spontaneity, transience, and radicalisation dominate the social change discourse. Individuals, self-represented, and not organizations predominate.

It must be remembered, of course, that the legitimacy of organisations doesn't necessarily derive from whom or how many people they represent, but rather from the right of association and expression and the credibility and impact of their public interest objectives. However, greater public support seems to be more and more vital for organisations, both to increase their impact as well as to be synchronised with the societies in which they act.

4 Final considerations

We find ourselves then with numerous inquiries into the paths that the struggle for rights might follow along and the breadth of the steps needed. In this brief article, three of these issues were analysed: the multiplicity of struggles, interlocutors and levels of actions taken by human rights organisations; the interaction of these organisations with the crises of representation and effectiveness of State institutions; and the impact of the strengthening of the individual as activist and political actor on the actions of these organisations.

History is testament to the numerous successes achieved by human rights defenders and organisations. They have positively impacted the lives of millions, transformed institutions, influenced public policies and contributed to the creation of the norms and values that guide humanity today.

A human rights organisation has responsibilities stemming from its principles and values that advance its mission, its efforts and impact, and the way it operates its activities (INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY, 2009). These responsibilities are related to good governance, effectiveness,

quality and independence, and these attributes demand perseverance and organisational solidity.

At present there seems to be a tension between caring and striving for what has been achieved and built, and deconstructing, innovating, reinventing and transforming. But these forces need not necessarily be opposites.

We must be solid enough to persist and have the desired impact and yet "liquid" enough to adapt, take risks and take advantage of the opportunities that contemporary society provides. It is on this difficult balance that the path seems to lead toward the guarantee of rights for human beings – those of flesh and bone. This is the unwavering point of reference for our daily struggle.

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NOTES

1. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) analysed 843 protests in 90 countries, from 2006 to 2013, and found that the greatest assortment of issues (218 protests) was for real democracy and greater representation. See ORTIZ; BURKE; BERRADA; CORTÉS (2013).

2. Some ideas found herein were discussed with activists worldwide during the 13th International Human Rights Colloquium on "A new global order in human rights? Actors, challenges and opportunities" sponsored by Conectas Human Rights (October, 2013 – São Paulo, Brazil); also at the meeting "Different Moment, Different Movement(s)" held by the Ford Foundation (April, 2014 – Marrakesh, Morocco).

3. See: http://www.movimiento15m.org. Last accessed in July, 2014.