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Experiences and Strategic Interventions in Transformative Democratic Politics

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The point of departure for this book has been the observation that the contemporary Global South is characterized by a seemingly paradoxical co-existence of formal institutions that are supposed to support liberal democracy and stagnation of democratization towards its universally accepted aim of popular control of public affairs on the basis of political equality (Beetham 1999). The global spread of liberal democratic institutions and neoliberalism has brought political and economic vibrancy, but also problems of depoliticized public affairs and flawed popular representation. This points to the need for more extensive democratization and especially raises questions about the means by which limited and poor institutions can nevertheless be used in efforts towards extensive and substantive democracy. The general answer provided by the contributors to this anthology has been to highlight the centrality of transformative democratic politics. This refers to political agendas and strategies to use emerging democratic freedoms and institutions to promote improved popular control of public affairs on the basis of political equality. The three parts in the book have sought to give conceptual and contextual depth to this agenda by examining comparative experiences with transformative democratic politics. The present chapter will extract some of the key lessons from these analyses before turning to a discussion of strategic interventions in support of transformative democratic politics.

Political economy and transformative democratic politics

One theme that runs through this book is that there are close links between transformative democratic politics and political economy, as

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seen in the historical making and contemporary changes of Scandinavian social democracies; the new experiments with transformative local politics in Latin America, South Africa and Indian state of Kerala; the failed cases of transformative politics in Indonesia and Sri Lanka; and various efforts to develop local alternatives to clientelism. Spaces, actors and strategies for transformative democratic politics are obviously framed by their political economic context. The historical experiences in Scandinavia and the contemporary political dynamics in the Global South that have been analysed in the preceding chapters are both set against what Polanyi (1957) famously describes as state-supported promotion of self-regulating markets and a hegemonic belief that market liberalism is the natural organization of economic activity. Likewise, Munck (2002) and other scholars have portrayed contemporary globalization as a second great transformation, especially characterized by economic deterritorialization and flexibilization. In both periods, it can be observed that the movement towards commodification of labour and nature has fostered diverse and context-specific counter-movements to protect society against social dislocations. The diverse struggles for popular interests and democratic control that have been examined in the preceding chapters can thus be seen as framed by the political economy of two great transformations towards market society.

In the Scandinavian case, the counter-movement against marketization gave rise to a distinct social democratic transformative project, as opposed to parallel fascist/Nazist and communist projects elsewhere. Some scholars have argued that such post-war social democracy has been little more than modified liberalism, which in turn has been mixed with the legacy of Christian Democracy in the context of the European Union (Judt 2007). In contrast, this volume supports the conclusion of Esping-Andersen (1985), Berman (2006) and others that Scandinavian social democracy aimed at a separate order in its own right, especially until the 1970s. It is also observed that there are now 'tendencies in Norway and Sweden toward a rehabilitation of certain Social Democratic traits' and 'renewed interest in the Scandinavian model internationally' (Sejersted 2011: 9); a recent example of the latter being the flagship report of UNRISD (2010) on experiences in the struggle against poverty and inequality.

While transformative democratic politics is framed by its political economic context, the preceding chapters thus rest on an argument about the primacy of politics (Berman 2006). The notion of transformative democratic politics is defined in contrast to the economistic modernization thesis that capitalist growth is the major precondition for

democracy. Instead the contributing authors have emphasized the role of key political actors and their strategies to use democratic political spaces to improve democracy and pursue popular interests by facilitating welfare-based economic development. This agenda highlights the interplay between institutions for governance of public affairs and channels for political participation and representation, on the one hand, and the diversity of actors, strategies and capacities involved in transformative democratic politics, on the other.

In terms of the social basis of transformative democratic politics, the present volume is marked by a certain foregrounding of popular actors and mobilization from below. But it has also shown that common assumptions about the agency of counter-hegemonic movements from below must be qualified, as popular movements are often hampered by problems of fragmentation, lack of political capacity and challenges of scaling up from particularistic issues. Hence we argue in favour of popular organization and claims for institutional and policy reforms that can accommodate popular interests and demands. This being said, the preceding chapters have also pointed to examples of social reforms that have been initiated by elite actors and the state, for example in India and China. The latter cases show that successful institutionalization of reform from above requires continuous support and contestation from popular mobilization in a mutually reinforcing process of transformative democratic politics. In conclusion, this calls for critical attention to the politics of state–society relations rather than any singular emphasis on community and civil society organizations or the elite and government.

A major difference between the old and recent great transformations is to be found in the realm of economic and political territoriality. The early waves of globalization and imperialism from the late 17th century and most extensively from the 1850s came to a brutal end with World War I and the era of the strong states. Hence historical experiences with transformative politics in the Scandinavian countries occurred within a political economy that was to a significant extent embedded in the territoriality of the state. While international trade and competitiveness played a decisive role in the development of these northern economies, contemporary globalization processes have no doubt produced more comprehensive shifts towards economic deterritorialization. Simultaneously, there are strong tendencies towards transfer of state authority vertically to supranational and subnational scales and horizontally to the market and civil society. This means that political authority has become more polycentric and technocratic and that

popular representation has become a basic democratic problem, as discussed in our previous anthologies (Harriss *et al.* 2004; Törnquist *et al.* 2009). But neither depoliticization nor polycentrism implies the end of the state. On the contrary, this volume shows that the state remains a key locus of transformative democratic politics. The major difference is that transformative democratic politics has become more multi-sited and multi-scalar, meaning that market institutions and civil society at local, national and global scales have become increasingly important in addition to conventional politics centred on the central state. These sites are not, however, autonomous political arenas but are rather inter-related nodes of transformative democratic politics – which is why the issue of democratic representation becomes increasingly important.

Finally, the present volume also demonstrates the close links between political economy and transformative democratic politics in the sense that economic and social issues are central to efforts at broad and substantive democracy. Both historical and contemporary experiences point to the importance for successful transformative politics of economic growth based on social citizenship and welfare policies. This is confirmed in the preceding chapters. In this context one critical question is whether and how it may be possible to transform elitist welfare reforms and fragmented livelihood struggles in India, Brazil, Indonesia and elsewhere into strategic policies and institutions that can strengthen both economic development and the democratic capacity of ordinary people. These and other issues show that although the present volume emphasizes the primacy of politics, transformative democratic politics is inexorably linked to general and contextual political economic structures and processes.

Lessons in transformative democratic politics

Transformative democratic politics refers to agendas and strategies to use emerging democratic freedoms and institutions to promote institutional and policy reforms that may enable people to achieve their aims and to improve democracy itself. Empirical evidence suggests that such transformative democratic politics is preconditioned by universal human rights, citizenship-based democracy, liberal-democratic constitutionalism and democratic institutions for issue and interest-based representation. This creates context-specific political spaces for developing demands from below for institutional reforms and inclusive welfare and economic policies from above. The focus is thus on whether and how popular demands for improved democratic participation

and representation and for issue and interest-based policies produce favourable and democratically decided policies that are also implemented in a democratic manner. What are the key lessons from this volume about the possibilities and problems of developing this kind of political dynamic?

First, several of the chapters draw attention to the manner in which public affairs are defined and delimited. It has already been mentioned that the contemporary period is marked by general tendencies towards neo-liberal depoliticization of public affairs. Several chapters show, in contrast, that a key component of transformative democratic politics is to redefine what issues should be subject to democratic and inclusive decision making. They also emphasize the institutional arrangements and capacity of the state to manage public affairs and implement models for economic growth that are environmentally sustainable and based on social welfare. The importance of state capacity is particularly clear in the Scandinavian and Latin American cases, as well as in the analysis of the different Indian states' capacity to negotiate and utilize global economic imperatives to promote both economic growth and social welfare. The contributors to this volume especially highlight state capacity as a product of mutually reinforcing relations between state and society. The importance of institutionalizing citizen- and interest-based representation and participation in decision making and state governance of public affairs is thus a foremost lesson from the preceding chapters.

Second, most of the case studies and comparative analyses in this volume emphasize the importance of popular mobilization, but also identify common problems of fragmentation and lack of organizational capacity. While the construction of political alliances of popular movements, labour unions, civil society organizations and political parties is vital, it is contingent on the existence of unifying issues and interests as well as a conducive political system that can foster close relations between the actors. Such political blocs (beyond specific interests and narrow party politics) have played a vital role in the historical making of the Scandinavian social democracies as well as the contemporary 'pink tide' governments in Latin America and post-apartheid transformations in South Africa. But these cases also demonstrate the challenges of both maintaining such blocs over time and to scale up from local to central politics, again pointing to the need for institutionalizing robust channels for political and interest-based participation and negotiations in addition to liberal elections.

Third, the present volume also points to the complex relations between democratic institutions and democratic practices. The

prevalent assumption, especially within the transition approach to democratization, is that democratic practice will follow from democratic institutions. In contrast, the preceding chapters and our previous anthologies have shown that institutions supposed to foster democracy often co-exist with non-democratic practices such as political clientelism and entrenched political exclusion of specific groups (Harriss *et al.* 2004; Törnquist *et al.* 2009). This means that transformative democratic politics cannot be confined to institutional reforms in a narrow sense but must also address the manner and degree in which people can become rights-bearing citizens who can both foster and participate in transformative democratic politics.

Strategic interventions in support of transformative democratic politics

The notion of transformative democratic politics discussed in this volume can be contrasted to the two mainstream general strategies for promoting democracy. First, the elitist introduction of supposedly ideal and universal liberal democratic institutions without altering the basic relations of power, and second, the elitist conservative crafting of strong institutions of rule of law and governance ahead of democracy. The liberal approach, on the one hand, is based on the expectation that moderate reformist actors, having been granted containment of radical popular movements as well as private ownership of public resources, will adjust to new institutions of freedoms, elections and civil society and thus become democrats. The conservative approach, on the other hand, assumes that enlightened autocrats and technocrats will foster what Huntington (1965) famously called 'politics of order' towards the rule of law as a precursor to political liberalization, to thus prevent abuse of liberal institutions and conflicts (Carothers 2007; Mansfield and Snyder 2007). The typical policy recommendations are therefore to support the crafting of liberal democratic institutions, especially civil and political freedoms and elections, or strong rule of law ahead of such liberties. By contrast, the idea of transformative democratic politics is based on the extensive empirical evidence that the liberal elite primarily tends to adjust to the new rules and regulations by bending and breaking them; that the same applies to the supposedly enlightened autocrats with regard to the institutionalization of rule of law; and that fragmented civil society groups have proved unable to build an alternative. Consequently, further support to institution building and civil society should be preceded by (a) firm knowledge on why these

negative results have occurred; (b) what alternative actors of change are present or may develop; and (c) what would it take to gradually support these propelling forces and processes instead. In short, while the mainstream approaches support elitist institution building as the foremost intervention strategy, our approach points to the importance of support for popular forces and their allies in their efforts to broaden and make emerging democracies more substantive.

The emphasis on transformative democratic politics in the present book goes a step further than our former volume on popular representation, in the sense that it highlights the need for close attention to constellations of political actors and forces as a basis for four strategic policy interventions.

The first type of policy intervention is support for inclusive and clear definitions of public affairs and citizenship. This fundamental precondition for democracy has often been taken for granted. Furthermore, the content and delimitations of public affairs have been blurred in the extensive process of privatization of matters that many people deem to be of common concern. This has produced minimalistic democracies with little impact on crucial economic and social processes and poor capacity to implement decisions. It has also contributed to growing problems of corruption and lack of transparency. Another aspect of the hollowing out of public affairs is the new emphasis on polycentric self-management in civil society. Ostrom (1990) and others may be right in arguing that people left on their own can govern local commons, but this does not answer the questions of what it takes to prevent external interventions or how localized governance can be scaled up. Similar problems apply to segmented governance of specialized sectors as well as to governance based on ethnic, religious, caste and other group identities. It remains true, as argued in the previous volume, that the basic problem is poor democratic representation. But as has been made increasingly clear in this book, better representation presupposes the reinvention of clear and inclusively defined public affairs and citizens.

The second type of intervention is policies that facilitate democratic development. This refers both to institutions for democratic decision making and to impartial implementation in accordance with the intentions and in support of further development of democracy. Our earlier anthology identified three policy areas as particularly important for improved popular representation: popular capacity building, popular organization building and a government committed to facilitation of popular representation (Törnquist *et al.* 2009). This means, first, to

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enhance the political agency of the individual with respect to political participation and representation. Next, it also means to support popular organization in their political role vis-à-vis both the state and the demos, that is, to address obstacles for organizing, problems of fragmentation, lack of institutional channels and problems of depoliticization. And finally, the policy agenda also includes the need for introducing and strengthening institutional spaces and sites for popular political participation and representation.

The present volume lends support to further identification of such policy interventions in two regards. There is, on the one hand, the particular importance of *welfare reforms* that strengthen both the democratic capacity of the citizens and economic development. Examples include reforms that have (a) strengthened the independent position and work participation of women; (b) fostered education, welfare and full employment to strengthen the position of the employees (and serve to integrate immigrants) as well as the development of efficient corporations and service providers; (c) facilitated equal civil rights and universal welfare and social security measures to enable broad popular alliances and prevent divisive special interest politics.

There is also, on the other hand, policy intervention related to the *political system*. The preceding chapters highlight the importance of inclusive electoral and party systems to prevent marginalization of forces and interests that can challenge the elite-driven stagnation of democracy. They also emphasize the provision of channels for independent representation and participation of vital interests (including those of employees, employers and self-employed), issues (such as those regarding environmental protection) and identities (e.g. based on gender, ethnicity and religion) in policy generation as well as in control of and implementation of public policies. Such channels promote transparency and accountability and thus strengthen both trust in public governance and the rationale of building broad and integrated organizations that can negotiate pacts on how to combine welfare and sustainable economic development.

The third type of policy intervention is about *civic and socio-political organization*. The main aim must be to contain factional projects among citizens, popular organizations and movements by supporting joint efforts instead, for demanding and supporting the kind of reforms mentioned above. This does not imply partisan support of any particular political party but rather broad facilitation of popular movements and alliances towards democratic development that may also be taken on by political parties.

This combination of civic and socio-political demands from outside public government for social, political and administrative reforms that may strengthen the capacity of progressive actors and movements is how one may avoid the conclusion that gradual development of extensive and substantive democracy is not possible without work for many decades to build up social movements and organizations and parties. As shown in previous chapters, well-designed transformative politics and policies were decisive in the cases of Brazil, South Africa, the Indian state of Kerala and Scandinavia. All the favourable conditions were not generated organically from below and for decades. Furthermore, as also shown in this book, there are examples of political dynamics that at least temporarily have opened up for progressive initiatives even under much less favourable circumstances, such as in the case of the top-driven Indian social and employment rights schemes or the emerging social and political contracts between local activists and post-clientelist politicians in parts of India and Indonesia.

The fourth policy area is the facilitation of *international alliances* of like-minded partners in transformative politics. A key argument in this book is that the new era of globalization since the 1960s, with a radically new international division of labour and the growth of dynamic industrial and service sectors in a number of countries in the Global South, increases the possibilities for social democratic transformative politics. One major condition for further advances is, however, that the global competitiveness of the new growth areas will be based more on development of efficient production and services than on low wages and environmental destruction, including in less developed surrounding countries. This calls for alternative politics and policies of the kind that we have indicated above. But it also calls for international alliances with like-minded partners. At least social democrats in the global North need to abstain from the attractive short-term solution of strengthening the competitive advantage of their own strategic sectors by benefitting from low-wage and environmentally destructive production and raw materials from the global South. But why would more internationally integrated strategies for welfare and growth be in the interest of social democrats in the North? The answer seems to be the need to support like-minded partners in the South in order for social democratic countries in the North to (a) avoid global environmental change and destruction, (b) be able to integrate citizens (including immigrants) in working life by way of full employment, (c) contain international competition based on low wages and environmental destruction. The short-term solution would, in contrast, undermine the long-term development of

more effective production and growth that can be combined with welfare not just in the Global South but also in the North. This is because it generates imbalances and social exclusion that undermines relative equality, wage compression, social stability and societal trust as well as the electoral basis for social democratic-oriented policies combined with environmental concerns.

In short, the globalization of the great transformation with extensive growth in the South does not only generate resistance among a multitude of movements and groups but also opens up for a transformative democratic alternative among like-minded partners.

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