

## The Political Economy for Social Movements and Revolution: Popular Media Access, Power, and Cultural Hegemony

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As neoliberal privatization expands, working and middle classes have been economically and socially displaced and atomized. Urban working classes, including the unemployed and underemployed are increasingly displaced from shared industrial sites of production. Identities and actions more frequently are expressed through community affiliations. While the class character of social movements may remain, the socio-political relations, aggregations, and structures have changed. Thus, diverse social movements arise in new transnational regimes of decentralized production, distribution, and hybridized local cultures of consumption.

In large part, new social movements now define and comprise global political conflict: from Cochabamba, to Kerala, India, to North Dakota. Despite the recurrence of such resistance and their hopeful visions of change, the material limits of “governing from below” are sharply revealed on every continent, posing challenges for political and organizational strategies. Crossing from resistant opposition to representative majorities in government brings another set of contradictions. As mass social movements realize modest political power, civil society leaderships and memberships frequently flounder in securing decision-making power, undermining revolutionary upsurges.

The transition to new political economy with a new cultural hegemony for social revolution always immediately confronts global market conditions and relations (such as oil or commodity prices) and transnational-national capitalist machinations (including media consolidation and economic disruption), as well as frequently generalized confusion and frustration by working classes, farmers, and small businesses that curb their consent for a new social order as difficulties mount from confronting entrenched interests and global capitalism.

In the process of building mass social movements, especially in the transition to representative or participatory governing power, as a prelude to revolutionary transformation, one key marker of progress is public and popular media access. Research for this paper, from case study histories across Latin America, finds that democratic media access by public constituencies becomes a site for communicative and political participation, knowledge, confidence, and leadership necessary for social revolution and simultaneously a manifest empirical measure of democratic participation in the production, distribution, and use of information, communication, political persuasion, and new cultural possibilities.

Political power, policy, and social movement structures coalesce in the institutionalized practices of media production—initially apparent in constitutional and policy adjustments guaranteeing the legal right of public access to media (as in Bolivia, Ecuador, Argentina, Venezuela)—but more importantly realized through the

direct action of securing and controlling the means of communication production and distribution. Venezuelan examples such as CatiaTve, Radio Primero Negro, and even TeleSUR provide the most powerful confirmation of how content reflects and contributes to the exposition of new cultural values, ideologies, and social relations. (Content from recent programs, supplemented with interviews of self-described revolutionary producers, and published community media mission statements provide the data for this analysis.)

The participatory production practices (with everyday citizens producing and hosting their own programs) and the democratic content (of oral histories, local issues, critiques of government and business, and everyday vernacular) reflect the hegemony of emerging “Bolivarian” 21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism expressed as popular participation in media production. Bolstered by constitutional changes and public funding, popular social movements of civil society, indigenous, women, and working class organizations have gained revolutionary ground by securing in practice the right of public access to media production. Other examples from Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua (included in this paper) further inform a possible template for assessing media democracy in production.

The findings indicate that public and community media (that move beyond alternative sites of local expression and concerns) provide a startling revolutionary contrast to the commercial media operations in every nation. Joint ventures and partnerships produce trans-national cultural diversity that hegemonically reproduces capitalist relations by promoting individualism, authority, and consumerism.

In contrast, popular media constructions (illustrated here with community media programming) suggest a new radically democratic cultural hegemony based on human solidarity with collective, participatory decision-making and cooperation offering real possibilities and experiences for increased equality and social justice.