6 | Environmental activism in Brazil: the rise of a social movement[1]

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Environmental mobilizations have been widely studied over the past few decades as part of a broad class of social movements. Competing perspectives in the field have emphasized their different analytical dimensions: political opportunities and mobilizing structures (political process), and on the other hand symbolic and cognitive features and collective identity-building processes (NSMs).

Recently, some scholars have produced a synthesis of these perspectives to accommodate both dimensions, strategy and identity, that each school had tended to focus on separately. In this vein, Diani (1995) argues that social movements are informal organizations whose existence depends both on activists sharing experiences and on mobilizing resources and strategies. Diani even redefines social movements in order to put the symbolic and material dimensions together as central features of the phenomenon. At the same time, he and other contemporary analysts consider the material and strategic dimensions stressed by political process theory as well as the symbolic dimensions emphasized by the NSM theoreticians, such as micro-mobilization contexts (Gamson 1982) in which collective identities and frames are created.

In this chapter the same blend of concepts helps explain why the Brazilian environmental movement appeared when and as it did, how the activists gathered in groups and networks, and which frames and strategies they built in order to mobilize. 'Political opportunity structure' (POS) describes the 'consistent – but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national – dimensions of the political struggle that encourage people to engage in contentious politics' (Tarrow 1998: 20). Being a middle-range concept, POS makes it possible to revive the political national conjunctures, which NSM theories frequently neglect (Kriesi 1995) – in our case, the Brazilian political conjuncture through which an environmental movement was formed.

The notion of 'micro-mobilization contexts' brings into our analysis the micro-dimensions of activism that macro-structural analyses usually lose,

such as the local contexts where mobilization first arises. Socio-economic extraction is not enough to explain why ordinary people mobilize around specific issues. As Mueller (1992: 10) argues, activism arises from micro-mobilization contexts, such as educational and professional institutions, cultural groups, and friendship and neighbourhood networks, in which activists live their everyday lives and engage with others. It is within micro-contexts of social interaction that isolated ordinary citizens gather in shared collective action, building a new identity as 'environmental activists'. Hence, this latter aspect is key to understanding how the identities of distinct environmental groups developed in Brazil.

Collective action also depends on activists' ability to build up shared interpretations. Activists interpret the situations they live in on the basis of their own experiences and perceptions, including even the most stable features of POS. This process occurs through frame production and alignment, as Snow and Benford (1992) demonstrate. This was the mechanism used by groups of activists with particular experiences to shape some aspects of the Brazilian social reality into environmental problems, comprising distinctive frames. These environmental frames have been adjusted to variations in POS, competing among themselves to prevail as the frame of the movement as a whole.

Social movements require organizational bases and strategies to support mobilization. Since social movements are not always institutionally based, activists have to appropriate or even create channels to achieve collective action from what is available (Tilly 1978). Mobilizing structures helps solidarity among members and collective identities arise (Diani 1995). Accordingly, to explain the formation of the Brazilian environmental movement, both the structured and fluid dimensions of collective action must be taken into consideration. All of these dimensions – POS, collective identity, micro-mobilization contexts, framing processes and mobilizing strategies – configured the Brazilian social movement.

In the following sections we argue that the Brazilian environmental movement is a network of different activist groups that became mobilized, originally, for different purposes in specific settings, following their own focal mobilizing routines. In specific POSs, challenges from opponents or specific opportunities for introducing issues on the public agenda strengthen ties among the groups and facilitate joint mobilization, helping to build common frames and mobilizing strategies and shaping 'movement identity' (Jasper 1997).

This chapter relies on a theoretical blend that uses the strengths of both approaches, relying on concepts derived from NSM theories, such

as 'collective identity', as well as from POS, from the theories of political process. Based on this combination, we argue here that three POSs – redemocratization, the Constituent Assembly and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Rio '92) – were decisive in the formation of the Brazilian environmental movement, as they brought to the fore the activists' problems concerning the coordination of their collective action. They were the context for the environmental activists' symbolic and strategic choices, substantially affecting the movement's make-up. The POSs also made possible the pivotal articulation between the vertical connections activists built inside the 'formal invited spaces', even in Congress, and the horizontal connections activists worked out among themselves by means of framing strategies and coalition-building.

Formation of environmental groups (1970–85)

Political opportunity structure of redemocratization Political process theory points out that social movements usually arise when changes in political opportunities increase the possibilities for making claims by opening up existing channels or creating new ones. This can occur in three main directions. First, political and administrative institutions can become more receptive to claims from civil society owing to crises in the coalition of the political elite. Second, the style of political interactions between the state and social movements can change, especially when the repression of mobilization is reduced. Third, potential allies may become available, such as other social movements, political parties, media or dissident elites (Kriesi 1995). These factors enhance the channels for dissatisfied social groups to express their demands in the public arena. In situations where many groups are organizing themselves to express grievances, a cycle of protests arises (Tarrow 1983). The formation of an environmental movement in Brazil was possible only thanks to the new POS in the late 1970s, which matched the above three conditions. The authoritarian regime, which had been in power since 1964, began to fall apart and the redemocratization process began.

The rise of environmental protests and groups during the authoritarian regime was made possible by a couple of peculiarities of the Brazilian dictatorship. Despite being politically and administratively very centralized and repressive of opposition groups,[2] the authoritarian regime kept some democratic features (Linz 1973). Electoral competition was also maintained, although limited to two official parties: ARENA (the National Renewal Alliance), comprising civil society supporters of the military