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Democratising Trade Politics in the Americas: Insights from the Women's, Environmental and Labour Movements

This paper focuses on civil society efforts to democratise trade policy in the Americas. It takes as its starting point the latest wave of trade integration schemes promoted in the Americas since the 1990s, and the mounting criticism of the social and environmental costs that these efforts at trade liberalisation bring in their wake.

The first part of the paper explores the links between trade and democracy, both in terms of the procedural and distributional dimensions of the current trade agenda. Procedurally, trade integration processes have been criticised for their lack of transparency and accountability. There have been some attempts to involve elements of civil society by encouraging public participation in trade negotiation processes. However, the formal consultation mechanisms have been largely 'instrumental', aimed more at obtaining legitimacy for the negotiation process rather than opening it up to wider debate.

The content of the trade agenda also has a number of important distributional and democratic implications. It tends to accentuate socio-economic asymmetries within and between countries. It is also consistent with the creation of a model of export-led development based on the intensive exploitation of natural resources and labour. Furthermore, many trade rules tend to restrict the

policy autonomy of states to set their own developmental priorities by determining policy instruments that can and cannot be legitimately used.

The paper then goes on to examine the literature on democratisation in Latin America that emerged in the 1980s. Initially much of this work was based on a minimalist conception of democracy defined as competitive elections and respect for civil liberties. Democratisation was largely regarded in terms of formal political institutions, ignoring the economy as a site for democratisation of social relations. By the mid-1990s, debates in the literature moved on to the quality of democracy. At the same time, neo-liberal reforms and the social transformations that came with them, led to a focus on the inter-relationship between political and economic reforms. It is in this context that heterogeneous social movements have emerged to press for social inclusion, challenging ideas about formal institutions being the only legitimate sites of political activity.

The paper then presents three case studies of the women's, environmental and labour movement in the Americas to analyse the potential of civil society organisations to democratise trade politics.

The women's movement has faced the double burden of opening spaces for gender concerns on trade governance within inter-governmental mechanisms, but also within civil society itself. Their interventions have contributed to exposing the key interconnections between the gendered nature of trade governance and its democratic deficits. Barriers to feminists engaging with these issues have included: a widespread assumption that the market is gender neutral among key institutional players; a failure to create explicit links between the broader feminist movement's traditional areas of struggle; and the constraints that the feminist movement faces in influencing Latin American leftist circles.

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The labour movement has sought to incorporate a social clause into trade agreements, based on International Labour Organisation (ILO) principles. In the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) agreement process, trade unions tried, unsuccessfully, to be formally incorporated into the governance structure. Instead, the labour movement became involved in the Continental Campaign against the FTAA, which enabled civil society groups to raise public awareness about the agreement, holding a series of consultations on the FTAA at the grassroots level.

The paper concludes by arguing that, notwithstanding some impressive achievements, the efforts of social movements to pluralise and democratise trade policy have led to shallow forms of democratisation. Greater numbers of people have been made aware of, and mobilised around trade issues, and higher levels of information and institutional oversight have been achieved than would otherwise have been the case. These are tremendous achievements in the light of the degree of secrecy and misunderstanding which surround trade policy negotiations in the region. However, the exclusionary and closed nature of negotiations, leaves many of those affected by these discussions marginalised. Opening up trade politics to a plurality of actors and perspectives through stronger forms of accountability, participation and the creation of checks and balances within and upon economic institutions is crucial, even if fuller forms of transnational democracy remain elusive.



Credits

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