

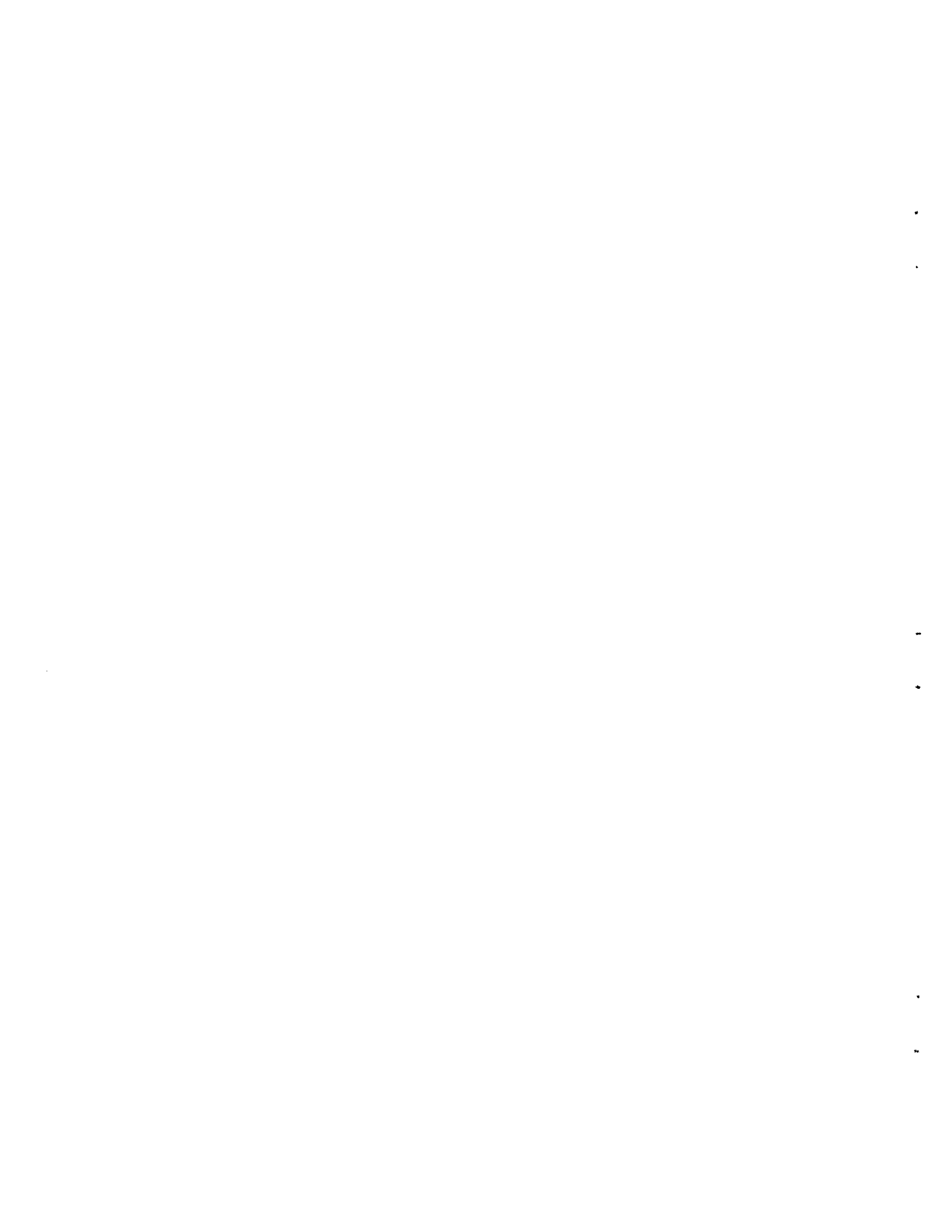


**Grassroots Popular Movements, Identity,
and Democratization in Brazil**

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the political impact and limits of grassroots popular movements in Brazil during the past decade. In the second half of the 1970s, as Brazil's military regime promoted a gradual process of political liberalization, grassroots popular movements burgeoned, generating widespread hopes among the forces that opposed the regime. Nearly a decade after this initial wave of optimism, it has become apparent that the earlier expectations have not been born out. The author analyzes why this has been the case. He argues that although a wide amalgam of social movements did oppose the military regime and did work towards democratization, their enormous heterogeneity made unity difficult to attain, except for very short times and for very specific conditions. Despite egregious poverty and inequalities, the popular classes have had difficulty creating a political identity based on common interests. Moreover, the state has intentionally pursued a policy of dividing social movements, and political parties have generally reinforced the fragmentation and isolation of grassroots movements. While underscoring these limits in grassroots movements, the author also argues that they have helped the popular classes conquer a sense of common identity and citizenship, and that they have helped put popular issues on the political agenda to a greater extent than in previous years.

RESUMEN

Este ensayo considera el impacto político y las limitaciones políticas de los movimientos populares de base en Brasil durante la década pasada. Durante la segunda mitad de la década de los setenta, cuando el régimen militar de Brasil promovía un proceso gradual de liberalización política, movimientos populares de base se fortalecieron, generando amplias esperanzas entre las fuerzas que se oponían al régimen. Cerca de una década después de esta onda inicial de optimismo, es aparente que las expectativas de antes no se han realizado. El autor analiza el por qué de este caso. Arguye que aunque una amplia amalgama de movimientos sociales se opuso al régimen militar y trabajó a favor de la democratización, su enorme heterogeneidad hizo difícil lograr la unidad, a no ser por periodos de tiempo muy cortos y en condiciones muy específicas. A pesar de la tremenda pobreza y la desigualdad que marcan la sociedad brasileña, para las clases populares les ha sido muy difícil crear una identidad política basada en intereses comunes. Por otra parte, el estado ha seguido intencionadamente una política de división de movimientos sociales, y los partidos políticos generalmente han reforzado la fragmentación y aislamiento de los movimientos populares. Mientras subraya estas limitaciones en los movimientos populares de base, el autor también arguye que ellos han ayudado a las clases populares a conquistar un sentido de ciudadanía común, y que han ayudado a colocar los asuntos populares en la agenda política en un grado mayor que en años anteriores.

This paper addresses the political impact and limits of grassroots popular movements in Brazil during the past decade. This subject is important for several reasons. First of all, grassroots popular movements generated widespread hopes and expectations among the forces that opposed the military regime. In the second half of the 1970s, as Brazil's military regime promoted a gradual liberalization process, grassroots popular movements burgeoned. For years, the military regime had successfully contained the opposition; the amalgam of social movements (including grassroots popular movements) that emerged in the second half of the 1970s suggested a partial erosion of the military's domination and ability to control civil society, as well as a strengthening of the opposition. Equally important, they challenged some long-standing components of authoritarian traditions in Brazil. Specifically, social movements apparently strengthened a civil society that had always been dominated by a strong state. Popular movements strengthened the popular presence in a society known for elitist and inegalitarian traditions.

Nearly a decade after this initial wave of optimism, it has become apparent that the earlier expectations have not been born out. As the country dragged through the lengthiest and worst economic crisis of its recorded economic history (1980 to 1984), a majority of social movements moved to the defensive. The opposition governors (March 1983-present) and later the new (post-March 1985) democratic government proved to be disappointments to most movement leaders, generating a sense of frustration. (In 1985, however, the labor and peasant movements began a period of increased militancy.)

The demise of many social movements is not surprising to observers familiar with their functioning in other settings. Movements tend to be less stable than political parties and more institutionalized organizations, hence they are more prone to cyclical histories. Yet the fact remains that in Brazil the partial decline of grassroots movements did come as

a surprise to many. Consequently it is time to reassess not only this decline but also some of the theoretical assumptions and propositions that guided the analysis of social movements in the late 1970s and early 1980s. There have already been some contributions in this direction; this article continues this theoretical reevaluation.¹

A second reason for analyzing the political impact of grassroots popular movements is that, despite their limits, they continue to be one of the most important voices demanding popular participation and attention to popular needs. In this sense, although I am critical of those who foresaw a unilinear growth of social movements, I am equally skeptical about the view that politics in democratic societies consists almost exclusively of institutional channels (parties, interest groups, the state). In the Brazilian context, the dawning of democracy has created new dilemmas for grassroots popular movements, but these movements continue to struggle for important rights and material improvements. Although the stability of democracy does not depend on being responsive to grassroots movements, the quality of democracy does. Furthermore, these movements help define some of the parameters of political life: they call attention to new issues, establish some of the symbolic content of politics, and prompt changes in the discourse and actions of other political actors.

Third, an analysis of grassroots movements tells us much about other instances of political life. Grassroots movements do not function in a vacuum; on the contrary, they constantly interact with major political and social institutions, among which political parties and the state deserve particular attention. Consequently, they tell us much about these parties and the state, at times revealing insights that are not so apparent from the "top down" view of history.

Before entering the corpus of the text, it is necessary to make one important distinction. By social movements, I refer to a wide amalgam of movements, including the feminist movement, the labor movement, the peasant movement, the ecology

movement, the human rights movement, and others. All of these movements emerged, or reappeared after a period of dormancy, in the second half of the 1970s. By grassroots popular movements, I refer to a subset of social movements. These are poor people's movements that develop in urban areas, but they are also different from the labor movement. Labor struggles involve the sphere of production, while grassroots popular movements focus on demands related to the sphere of reproduction. Grassroots popular movements attempt to improve urban living conditions, usually through demands on the state for public services including sewers, paved roads, better transportation facilities, better medical facilities, running water, and electricity.

Grassroots Popular Movements in Brazil

Although my primary concern here is with some theoretical problems in the analysis of grassroots popular movements in Brazil, it is useful to first give some rudimentary historical background. In Brazil, popular participation has historically been limited; the society has a lengthy history of elitism which has largely excluded the popular classes from the most important institutions. Especially compared to Argentina and Chile, but even compared to some countries such as Peru that are poorer than Brazil, the popular sectors have had a weak political presence. The history of grassroots popular movements reflects this generally weak popular presence. Although popular neighborhood associations have existed since at least the 1930s in some cities, not until the effervescent early 1960s did they receive much attention from state elites and political parties. Labor unions and the peasant movement were far more visible as political actors than grassroots movements. Between 1961 and 1964, in a period of popular mobilization, the number and visibility of grassroots movements increased considerably, but the military regime that took power in 1964 put an end to this ephemeral process.

Although the repression was particularly pronounced against peasant and labor leaders, many leaders of grassroots movements were imprisoned. The repression made it almost impossible for autonomous grassroots movements to develop strong ties with party leaders, thereby greatly reducing the possibilities for alliances and leading to isolation. Many neighborhood associations disappeared or went into hibernation. Most of those that survived did so either by developing close ties to the military government, in which case they were marked by a very conservative orientation, or by adopting a cautious, limited perspective, even if they were not allies of the government.

The period of virtual dormancy of grassroots movements ended around 1974. In part, the resurgence of grassroots movements responded to an easing in repression. General Ernesto Geisel, president from 1974 until 1979, initiated a slow, gradual, and cautious liberalization process that allowed somewhat greater space for popular organization, and his successor, General João Figueiredo (1979-85), eventually oversaw a transition to democracy (Mainwaring 1986b). The grassroots movements also reflected a retrenching of popular organization, often led by the Catholic Church and sectors of the left, that may have occurred even without political liberalization.

The extraordinary number and heterogeneity of grassroots movements make it impossible to give a general account of their development after 1974. Nevertheless, we can detect some main trends in three different periods. Between 1974 and 1978, many new movements were created, and old ones were reactivated. Although most movements were still quite isolated, this was a period of ascendancy for the movements. From 1978 until 1982, the number of grassroots movements increased, though probably not as dramatically as in the preceding four years. During this period, many movements made successful efforts to create alliances with other movements and with political parties, enabling them to partially overcome the isolation that had previously

characterized their development. Among progressive sectors, there was considerable enthusiasm about the potential of the grassroots movements, seen as a means of creating a more democratic society. Finally, the period since 1982 has witnessed a more complex process: some movements have declined and even disappeared, and although new movements have emerged, one generally senses some disappointment and frustration among movement leaders.

Nevertheless, grassroots movements were in part responsible for the mobilizations in 1984 that eventually pushed the military government to allow a civilian president to assume office in March 1985, bringing to an end 21 years of military rule.

Heterogeneity and Fragmentation of Social Movements

Part of the optimism regarding the political impact of the amalgam of social movements in the late 1970s revolved around the assumption that they would be able to unite, oppose the authoritarian regime, and work towards creating a more democratic society. Retrospectively, this assumption may seem naive, but at the time there were some grounds for it. Almost all of these social movements did in fact oppose the military regime, and at times they were able to form a very loose alliance based on this opposition.

Over time, however, the predominant tendency has been towards fragmentation and isolation of social movements. This fragmentation and isolation has resulted from a combination of two main factors. First, although all of these social movements did oppose the military regime and did work towards democratization, their enormous heterogeneity made unity difficult to attain, except for very short times and for very specific conditions. The absence of unity has been a salient factor weakening their democratizing potential.

Second, the state intentionally pursued a policy of dividing social movements--a policy that has largely been effective. In this section, I will develop the first point; later I focus on the latter.

Considering that "social movements" is a broad category, involving different kinds of movements that express different demands,² it is hardly surprising that there are cleavages among movements. A first significant cleavage is that between rural and urban movements. In the Brazilian context, the movements' demands and linkages to political parties and to the state differ according to the urban /rural distinction. Most rural movements have focused on land questions, wages, and prices for farm goods. Some urban movements have focused on land issues and wages, but others have addressed ecological concerns, public lighting, security, health questions, or the relationship between men and women.

In urban areas, there is also an important class differentiation between middle class and popular movements. The leading Marxists who have written on social movements generally argued that urban social movements cut across different social classes.³ The Brazilian reality, however, is that although different urban movements involved different social classes, rarely did the same movement involve both the popular and the middle sectors. A movement may represent different socio-economic groups within the popular sectors, but in most cases that is the limit of heterogeneity. For example, many neighborhood movements have represented different socio-economic positions within the popular classes, but only a small minority have represented both the middle and popular classes.

Middle class and popular class demands may converge in given historical moments, forming social movements that challenge the state and attempt to democratize the political order. Such a convergence is especially likely when the state's legitimacy is low. In both Spain and Brazil, for example, a wide amalgam of social movements from both

the popular and middle sectors challenged the authoritarian state and contributed towards democratization. In Brazil, the most important convergence between middle class and popular movements occurred in the campaign for direct elections in the first four months of 1984. Both middle class and popular movements were largely opposed to the authoritarian regime that had rapidly lost its legitimacy in the period following the November 1982 elections. This made possible the kind of short-lived alliance based on a specific demand (direct elections for president) that resulted in massive demonstrations against the military government in dozens of cities. However, both the fragility and the specificity of this alliance were telling. The movement ended abruptly after April 25, 1984, when the Congress failed to muster enough votes to pass the Amendment for Direct Elections.

There have been a few cases of more stable alliances between middle and popular class movements. The Federation of Neighborhood Associations of the State of Rio de Janeiro (FAMERJ), the most effective statewide neighborhood federation in the country, has combined popular and middle class associations in essentially harmonious ways. Yet this alliance between popular and middle class associations is subject to constant tensions. Even FAMERJ, which is unusual in its ability to form a unified, multi-class organization, has not represented favela associations, which have separate representation by the Federation of Associations of Favelas of the State of Rio de Janeiro, FAFERJ.

In any society, middle and popular class demands are certain to diverge at some points, and this divergence is even more marked in a society like Brazil, where the gap between middle classes and popular sectors is extreme. In a country with one of the worst patterns of income distribution in the world,⁴ the distribution of urban services reflects the severe inequalities found throughout the society as a whole. While cities like Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo have some residential areas that are as affluent as wealthy

areas in the developed world, for vast parts of the population basic needs like running water, electricity, and garbage collection remain unanswered. Needless to say, the demands from popular class areas diverge sharply from those of middle class and wealthy neighborhoods.

In the constant struggle that defines the political world, these diverging needs are often at odds, for the state has limited resources with which to respond to different demands. Repairing the streets or sidewalks of a middle class area often competes with installing sewers in poor districts. No matter what the intentions of neighborhood leaders, nothing can eliminate this basic contradiction of interests. Thus, while there may be some convergences between the middle and popular sectors, particularly over some political objectives (such as overthrowing an authoritarian regime), some conflicts are inevitable. Paradoxically, these conflicts are more likely to emerge if the movements are successful in meeting one of their converging interests, i.e., helping depose an authoritarian regime. Under a democratic regime, the articulation of mutual interests becomes more difficult because the primary basis of the alliance was opposition to the authoritarian regime.

Conflict between middle class and popular movements is likely to emerge even in cases where the middle class leadership is concerned with popular demands. An interesting example occurred in the feminist movement in Brazil. Initially inspired by the United Nations International Women's Year in 1975, in the early phases the feminist movement was strongly marked by foreign influences. The leadership was virtually exclusively middle class (or upward), and many leaders had first come into contact with feminism through living in exile. In a relatively short period of time, however, movement leaders became aware of the need to adapt feminist ideas to the reality of a country where survival was a problem for much of the population. A significant part of the movement became concerned with working with popular class women, and there have been some successes in this regard. Overall, however, popular class women regard feminist ideas

with suspicion or even hostility. The term "feminism" is eschewed even among popular class women who exercise leadership roles in social movements and who are relatively open to many feminist ideas. Most popular class women who are politically active, especially when they participate in base communities of the Catholic Church, have relatively traditional ideas about the family, divorce, and abortion (Singer 1980, Schmink 1981).

Even within urban popular movements, there is significant heterogeneity. As a result, it is difficult and unusual for urban popular movements to achieve unity among themselves except, again, for temporary and specific objectives. Greater São Paulo is in this sense paradigmatic. Thousands of Catholic base communities, neighborhood associations, commissions for dealing with transportation, commissions for legalizing land titles, etc., have proliferated. Yet in contrast to Rio de Janeiro (which is exceptional in this regard), these different movements have not been able to form a unified movement. On the contrary, they are highly fragmented, according to focus, party preference and geography.

There is often conflict between different urban popular movements, stemming either from different situations or needs, or from different political orientations. While all the popular classes form an identity as the poor (os pobres), there nevertheless exist significant differences in the living conditions, material needs, and worldview of the popular sectors. The situation of people who recently occupied urban land illegally is far more precarious than that of those who live in an established neighborhood which has a tradition of battling for urban services. In the case of a land invasion, the residents generally have no urban services and extremely low incomes, and the illegal nature of the invasion induces them to fight above all for the legalization of their land. An established popular neighborhood would generally have better, although still highly deficient, urban services and the population would be better off. The diversity of popular situations and

demands is seen even within a single favela. Rocinha, the largest favela of Rio de Janeiro, has three different neighborhood associations, each of which serves different areas and has established different priorities. One association represents the best established, oldest, and "wealthiest" part of the favela, while the other two are divided along political lines.

In addition to conflict which stems from the heterogeneity of popular situations and demands, conflict also arises because of different political orientations. Just as occurs throughout the society at large, the fact of sharing some common needs does not imply having a common political orientation, even among people who actively participate in popular movements. The level of conflict within and between movements is often significant. Because urban popular movements are often linked to different partisan factions, conflict between these factions is frequently reproduced in struggles between different movements or within a particular one.

An interesting example of debilitating political conflict among urban popular movements occurred in the favela movement of Rio de Janeiro in the late 1970s. Rio is historically the Brazilian city where favelas first appeared in large numbers, and also the one where a strong favela movement first appeared during the early 1960s. This movement was crippled by repression after 1969, but political liberalization enabled it to resurface in the late 1970s. Two competing FAFERJs emerged, one closely linked to the conservative state governor, the other linked to more progressive partisan positions. Partisan debates prevented both federations from helping to activate a more dynamic favela movement. Disputes over power and legal recognition superceded debates about how to win urban services.

In one city where I worked, a neighborhood association in a poor region impeded the participation of favelados in the movement. The prejudices held by extremely poor people--themselves the victims of considerable prejudice--towards their even poorer

neighbors were remarkable. Favelados were portrayed as thieves, as violent, dishonest, dirty, and lazy, and were excluded from participating in a common quest for material goods and dignity on those grounds.

This heterogeneity gives us a first important insight as to why urban social movements were less significant in changing Brazilian politics than most people expected. Under these conditions of internal differentiation and conflict, the democratizing potential of social movements is bound to be limited. Rather than uniting to challenge the state to significantly redistribute its resources towards popular neighborhoods, the more common pattern is to compete with other neighborhoods to see who gets the most resources.⁵

Urban Contradictions, Identity, and Popular Movement

The issue of what causes social movements to emerge, develop, and decline is complex. Here it is important to address one aspect of this problem, namely, the relationship between "objective" material conditions, social identities, and political activity. In what follows, I argue that a significant part of the problems of grassroots popular movements lies in the difficulty of translating some roughly common material needs into a viewpoint that it is possible and desirable to form social movements that will pressure the state into improving urban services. I also argue that political identity and the role of outside institutions and actors are as important in understanding grassroots movements as is the nature of objective material conditions.

The starting point for the most influential analysts of Brazilian social movements in the late 1970s was the relationship between "urban contradictions" and social movements. They argued that capitalist societies generate contradictions which are reflected in deficient urban services. Because investments for urban services are not

profitable for private enterprise, the state is the primary agent responsible for these services. The deficiency in these services subsequently generates the potential for movements to emerge and confront the state in an effort to improve their living conditions.

This literature made some valuable points regarding the relationship between urban contradictions and social movements, but its reading of the relationship between urban contradictions and social movements was excessively "economistic." All of the authors posited too close a relationship between "objective" reality and the way social forces respond to that reality. The problem is that while there may be "objective" contradictions, the interpretation of these contradictions is a social process. The way an individual or group responds to such contradictions can--and does--vary enormously.

The process of acting upon "objective contradictions" in the form of participating in social movements requires several mediating factors.⁶ First is the question of how social actors perceive a situation, including whether or not they see a situation as a contradiction in the sense of acting against their interests. In the Brazilian case, the urban poor are undoubtedly aware of their situation of poverty. The opposition between wealthy and poor is one of the primary reference points in popular consciousness. The wealthy are generally perceived as dishonest, as exploiting the poor. Thus, an important part of popular identity is determined, almost directly, by material conditions in the society.

But these material conditions explain only a part of popular identity, and in particular do not adequately explain the formation of an identity conducive to popular movements. Popular movements that have emerged directly in response to material threats have generally been defensive in nature, that is, oriented towards protecting a situation rather than presenting new demands to the state. These movements have been limited in scope and consciousness and fragile in organization.

Even though popular consciousness in urban areas reflects clear awareness of material conditions, in most cases it is not a consciousness that radically opposes the extant social order, or even one that leads to active political participation. In the large urban areas like São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, the popular sectors voted massively against the authoritarian regime beginning in 1974 (Lamounier and Cardoso 1978; Lamounier 1980). Nevertheless, opposition to the regime remained diffuse, and according to most accounts, social ascension was seen as an individual rather than a class problem.

There are significant differences in the explanations developed for one's material situation. Poverty, for example, can be perceived as resulting from God's will (as a paradigmatic passive response) or as an injustice perpetuated by the dominant classes (as a paradigmatic response receptive to action for change). The latter perception is much more aware of the "objective contradictions" than the former. Faced with a situation of deprivation, an individual or group can long for significant improvements, or conversely can accept the situation with relative equanimity (Moore 1978). The definition of needs is a social process that, although linked to material conditions, also has some autonomy vis-à-vis those conditions.

Second, the popular classes have a wide range of needs. Material needs have traditionally (and not only by Marxists) been conceptualized as in some sense more "real" or fundamental than other kinds of needs, and in the case of poor people this tendency is even more accentuated. But poor people, like others, do not define their needs strictly along material lines. Affective needs, for example, are an important part of popular family lives, and the pursuit of fulfilling affective needs often takes priority over political activity designed to obtain material benefits. Thus, an individual may prefer to spend Sunday afternoons playing soccer or participating in a Carnival rehearsal rather than participating in a neighborhood association. Or she/he may simply prefer to remain at home. Religion

may take priority over political activity for many individuals. To dismiss these affective and religious priorities as "alienation", and to then question why the poor are alienated and analyze what must be done to change this alienation, is simplistic social science; it denies to the poor dimensions of human life that we recognize as important for people whose material needs are less pressing.⁷ This is not to say that the urban poor in Brazil do not worry about poverty; on the contrary, constant awareness of poverty and the anxieties it generates form an important part of every day life. But people may put their priorities elsewhere than in participating in social movements.

Third, even when an actor experiences some need, there is still a question as to whether it is possible to act upon these needs. In the Brazilian case, parts of the popular classes are skeptical about the possibility of change. Religion, the political context, and other factors can contribute to a sentiment that it is virtually impossible to act upon "objective contradictions."

In Brazil, a "fragmented consciousness" (Ortiz, 1980) prevails in relation to the perception of the possibility of acting upon one's needs. The popular classes generally are aware of their situation in the society, and they often attribute this situation to exploitation by the wealthy. In this sense, there exist the seeds of a critical consciousness that could apparently give rise to movements which would challenge the inegalitarian nature of the society. However, alongside this perception is a generalized tendency to see the political system as essentially closed and impermeable to change. Most people believe that if change is possible, it is change for themselves, to be effected by climbing the social ladder. Only a minority of the popular sectors believe in the efficacy of change through active political participation (Caldeira 1980, Caldeira 1984).

Popular perceptions about the difficulty of effecting social change through collective action result largely from a political system which has historically functioned in a way that severely limits popular demands. Corporatist labor structures that impede labor

unity, clientelistic mechanisms that buy off some popular demands and shut out the more radical ones, and a lengthy history of public and private repression against autonomous popular leaders all contribute to a situation of generalized skepticism about politics as a means of achieving social improvement. The free rider problem clearly exacerbates this situation, especially since the risks of leading collective action have been high.

Finally, even among those individuals who perceive social contradictions and believe it is possible to act upon them politically, there are different perceptions of how to act. For example, an individual could attempt to resolve the situation by speaking to his/her local town council representative. This kind of response is not conducive to forming social movements, even though it reflects a consciousness that could easily evolve into one disposed to participate in a social movement. Only at the point when several individuals share some basic similarities in their perception of the legitimacy and efficacy of collective action is it possible to begin creating a social movement. Even then, as analysts from Olson (1965) to Dahl (1970) have noted, some people (the "free riders") want others to carry the ball, and others are not interested enough to find the time to participate.

The creation of social movements therefore responds as much to social identity as it does to objective contradictions and conditions.⁸ By social identity I mean the way in which actors perceive their interests, role in the society, and relationship to other groups and institutions. Social identity thus includes such diverse aspects as political perceptions, perceptions of sex roles, perceptions of work, etc. Political identity refers to those aspects of social identity related to the political world.

Social identity is shaped by objective conditions, but the relationship is not as clear as most Marxists have suggested. Through the notion of "false consciousness", many Marxists tend to postulate a "correct" social identity which would correspond to given material conditions. Even Gramsci (1971) and Althusser (1971), despite their rich

contributions to the Marxian discussion of ideology, tend to overstate the causal connection between objective conditions and consciousness.⁹

Political identity cannot be deduced from action alone since actions are also shaped by the political regime. Under an authoritarian regime, political action is curtailed even though political identities do not necessarily undergo significant transformations, at least in the direction desired by most authoritarian regimes, towards a more passive identity. Indeed, one of the defining features of authoritarian as opposed to totalitarian regimes is that they primarily aim to demobilize the population rather than create mechanisms of socialization which would profoundly alter political identities (Linz 1964). Authoritarian regimes seriously suppress or impose limitations upon the party structure, for example, but they do not attempt to indoctrinate people into a single party precisely because they lack the mechanisms of socialization which would be required for them to do so. Lengthy experiences of authoritarianism may breed political apathy,¹⁰ but they are unlikely to induce profound changes of identity among actors with a previously structured identity. In any case, despite their limited ability to impose major transformations of political identities in the direction they prefer, authoritarian regimes can prevent a given identity from actualizing itself in the form of participation that challenges the regime.

In addition to action, the other main component that expresses political identity is political beliefs. Beliefs should not be reduced to discourse, since discourse can conceal a gap between self-perception and reality. Discourse can also be an intentional means of camouflaging interest for instrumental purposes.¹¹

This discussion of political identity is important in understanding the difficulties urban popular movements have faced in Brazil. Despite the great inequalities in the society, the popular classes have had difficulty in organizing to create social movements.

Although it is not the only factor which explains this difficulty, the problems in forming a political identity based on common interests has clearly contributed to this situation.

The emphasis on collective identity in the development of social movements raises the question as to what stimulates the formation of such an identity. Marxist theory has generally approached this question in terms of class conditions and consciousness. Without positing an inherent relationship between class position and class consciousness, Marxist theory generally argues that ultimately, material conditions shape the consciousness of different social actors. However, at least for reasonably sophisticated Marxists, the extrapolation from class position to consciousness is not linear. The argument that material conditions govern consciousness only in the final instance allows for other non-material explanations of consciousness. In addition, the notion of false consciousness can help explain the absence of a clear linkage between class and consciousness. Unfortunately, both of these qualifying statements still have problems, at least as they are usually employed. The notion of final instance or ultimate determinant is sufficiently vague that any conceivable development could be explained as expressing the ultimate primacy of material factors. In this sense, explanations that rely on "the final instance" often tend towards tautologies. The notion of false consciousness inevitably gives rise to the difficult and probably unanswerable query: what gives the Marxist intellectual the privileged knowledge to proclaim the true consciousness? Moreover, there is no adequate explanation as to why a correct or false consciousness emerges.

In accounting for the formation of social identities, the problems of the strains of classical liberalism that posit the existence of a rational, free individual are equally acute.¹² The formation of identities is obviously a social process, conditioned to a significant extent by the material conditions in which an individual lives. Furthermore, the genesis of collective movements implies the formation of a social (collective) identity. Although

individuals freely choose to participate or not in a given movement, as rational choice theories suggest, the possibility of collective action also presupposes the formation of a consciousness of having common interests. The formation of such a consciousness is a social process that transcends individual choice, and that is conditioned to a large extent (though not exclusively) by the material conditions of a given population. In this sense, even though Marxist theory can be criticized for overstating material determinants of identity, it does call attention to important elements overlooked by some liberal thought.¹³

One crucial aspect of the formation of popular identities that is often understated is the role of mediating actors and institutions. Popular subjects are not simply and exclusively shaped by elite values, behavior, and institutions, but these values, behaviors, and institutions set parameters that define most popular political behavior. The formation of a more critical popular consciousness, for example, has generally been mediated by the political struggle at large, and by forces outside the popular classes. In particular, the Catholic Church, different forces on the left, and political parties have played a major role in determining the nature and problems of popular movements in Brazil.

Historically, the Brazilian Catholic Church generally opposed rather than supported popular protest. Minority sectors within the Church, however, began to engage in popular organizing in the late 1950s. After the 1964 coup, a growing number of Church leaders assumed radical options; by the early 1970s, Brazil's Church was the most progressive in the Roman Catholic world. Many important grassroots innovations took place after 1964. Through small neighborhood groups known as ecclesial base communities (CEBs), the Church developed extensive grassroots work with the popular classes in many dioceses throughout the country. Although their primary function is religious, these base communities have been concerned with promoting a critical

consciousness among the popular classes. In many parts of the country, popular movements have been closely connected to this grassroots Church work. The Church's work has been particularly important in encouraging people to participate in popular movements; its political efficacy has been more debatable (Mairwaring 1986a).

Different segments of the left have historically played an important leadership role in many popular movements in Brazil, including some neighborhood movements. The relationship between the non-Catholic left, which generally follows different Marxist lines, and grassroots popular movements has fluctuated considerably over time. Traditionally, the Marxist left was more concerned with labor-capital conflicts than urban issues, so it focused on factory organizing. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, this changed somewhat as the left got more involved in neighborhood organizing and literacy work. After the coup, however, most of the Marxian left underwent a process of radicalization that lasted until about 1974, leading once again to downplaying the significance of local popular groups. But around 1974, largely in response to the dismal defeats of the previous decade, the left once again began to actively engage in grassroots work in the major cities. Whereas the Church's work has been especially important in motivating grassroots participation, the left's presence has been particularly important at the leadership level, in developing strategies for popular movements.

This emphasis on the role of the Church and the left is important because the transformation from a relatively passive social identity to one which at least encourages participating in popular movements does not occur spontaneously. Rather it requires some experience that impels the individual to rethink his/her world view. In isolated cases, this experience can occur without mediation from an outside institution. More

commonly, however, the transformation of identity has required the intervention of actors who help develop a more critical consciousness.

Thus, the role of different mediating political actors is as important as urban contradictions in analyzing social movements. This not to glorify the role of the Church or the left, to minimize the conflicts their presence implies for popular movements, or to suggest that they have been uniformly successful in promoting the transformation of identity. It is important, however, to refute the notion that if left to themselves, popular movements would develop more naturally. This veneration of popular consciousness and practices has become common in recent years, especially in Church circles.¹⁴

One final point about the limits of grassroots popular movements is in order. Similar limits can be found in most grassroots movements throughout much of Latin America, and indeed in developed Western democracies as well. But it would be wrong to suggest that these limits somehow inhere in the nature of grassroots popular movements. In Brazil the problem derives not so much from inherent limits as from the opportunity structure these movements encounter.

During the most blatantly authoritarian periods, state elites have paid little attention to grassroots movements, largely because such movements have been so fragmented and inefficacious. Even during democratic periods, elites have responded to these movements by attempting to divide the population, limit the nature of demands, and enervate their dynamism. For example, rather than recognizing the legitimacy of popular demands for sewers and installing them on a nationwide basis, Brazilian politicians have almost always attempted to coopt such demands by granting the service to political allies. They attempt to present urban services as a personal favor granted in exchange for political allegiance, rather than an obligation of the politician working on behalf of his/her constituency. Traditional personalistic political practices have eroded somewhat during the past twenty years, and in no small measure this is due to grassroots popular

movements. But clientelism reigns strong in Brazil, while universal entitlement is far less common than in Chile or Argentina. The widespread practice of clientelism, coupled with the absence of practices of universal entitlement, make it difficult for popular movements to secure what they seek.

In some other Latin American countries, political parties have been important mechanisms for unifying the fragmentary demands of grassroots movements. This is particularly true in (pre-1973) Chile and Argentina, where the most important social movements have been closely identified with parties. In Brazil, conversely, parties have generally reinforced the isolation and fragmentation of grassroots movements. The parties, themselves subordinate to the state, have been elitist and pragmatic, tending towards self-serving (Campello de Souza 1983). The widespread practice of switching party affiliations simply to be part of the party in power, no matter what its program, is illustrative. This switching enables the politician to retain access to state favors that can be granted to "friends," within a system of elite consensus that limits popular benefits.

Identity, Citizenship, and Justice

Thus far I have focused on limits of grassroots popular movements, but that is only half the story. Political life is continuously being redefined through the micro arenas of society. Institutions may be the most important aspect of politics, but they are not the only one. The way institutions develop constantly responds to and interacts with what takes place at the base of society. Here, identities are formed and reshaped; new ideas about power and legitimacy emerge; new expectations about leaders and institutions come forth. Of course, what takes place at the base is in turn shaped by elites and institutions, but it also has some relative autonomy. Popular dispositions and proclivities are not infinitely malleable; although their impact on elites and institutions is often subtle

and sometimes even indiscernible, it is nonetheless real. The most significant political impact of grassroots popular movements is influence on the reworking of the symbolic side of political life, the new understandings of authority and legitimacy, and the subtle change in elites and institutions that results from the interaction with these changes at the base. I develop this argument in what follows (See also Levine and Mainwaring 1986).

Participation in popular movements both indicates and actuates changes in popular identity. It indicates a change in popular identity in that it reflects a sense of common interests such that a person has decided to join the movement. It can actuate changes in identity because participation in the movement makes possible a further transformation of consciousness. This potential for effecting changes in popular consciousness, however, is not automatic. An individual could participate in a movement for a brief time without undergoing any change of consciousness.

These changes in popular identity are related to one of the most important aspects of the grassroots popular movements, namely, acquiring a sense of citizenship. Brazil has never had the kind of virtually universal citizenship characteristic of some other Latin American nations such as Argentina, Chile, or Uruguay. Citizenship implies a set of rights that belong to an individual simply by being an adult member of a nation. In Brazil, strong social hierarchy and extensive personal powers of prestigious individuals have overshadowed the universality of rights.¹⁵ Of course, social hierarchy and powerful individuals exist everywhere, but they do not undermine universal criteria of citizenship to an equal extent. In Brazil, such a fundamental attribute of citizenship as the free vote was historically limited to the minority of the population that was literate, and further undermined (especially in rural regions) by personal control over how poor people voted.

If seen exclusively from the perspective of the difficulties urban popular movements have faced in attaining even the most basic material demands, the movements can be dismissed as ineffective and insignificant. However, even if their

material conquests are partial and limited, grassroots popular movements can be an important means of constructing a new popular identity that implies a fuller citizenship (Cardoso 1983, Durham 1984, Evers 1984). Participation in popular movements implies a quest for rights that "belong" to the popular sectors. The process of independent participation in political life indicates a change from past patterns of submission. Moreover, in a society that has reached Brazil's level of development, the rudimentary material benefits that grassroots movements seek to obtain can themselves be considered an indispensable part of citizenship.

In this regard, the grassroots popular movements that have proliferated in the last decade are one of the most important popular political vehicles that has emerged essentially free from the tutelage of the state. Brazil's labor unions emerged under corporatist laws and structures that remain intact till this day (Schmitter 1971, Souza Martins 1979, Vianna 1976), even though the practices of the labor movement since the 1970s have altered the functioning of some of these corporatist mechanisms (Tavares de Almeida 1983, Keck forthcoming). By contrast, the grassroots popular movements of the last decade have been a significant expression of a more autonomous civil society.¹⁶

Furthermore, the movements have helped redefine the parameters of political discourse in subtle but significant ways. Perhaps most important has been the change in discourse, away from the technocratic elitist discourse that permeated all sides of the political spectrum in the late 1960s and first half of the 1970s, to a new discourse that emphasizes popular participation. Fifteen years ago, the belief in the enlightened vanguard was widespread among the left, while the military regime was at the apogee of its belief that technocrats could solve the problems of the world. By contrast, by the early 1980s, among all sides of the political spectrum a discourse emphasizing the importance of popular participation was widespread. This "new" discourse (which has some parallels to that of the early 1960s) particularly calls attention when its exponents are part of the

center-right, which has generally done what it can to limit popular participation, or of the Marxist left, which after the 1964 coup developed thoroughly elitist strategies for effecting political change. Even though the change in discourse has not been accompanied by comparable changes in practices, the new discourse implies the necessity of somewhat greater sensitivity to popular participation and needs. It is symptomatic that the authoritarian regime began to attempt to become more responsive to popular demands under the Figueiredo administration (1979-1985). After fifteen years of sharp income redistribution towards the already privileged and of eroding real hourly wages, in 1979 the government announced a wage policy more favorable to the poorest sectors of society. Also in the late 1970s, popular housing projects expanded and the government made efforts to provide minimal urban services to popular neighborhoods. These attempts ultimately failed as the regime opted for austerity rather than populism when the economic crisis became severe in 1982, but the very perception of a need to formulate a strategy for dealing with the popular classes suggested that the grassroots movements helped redefine the political arena.

While grassroots movements have been important in helping the popular classes conquer a sense of identity and citizenship, some caution is necessary regarding their ability to promote significant changes in the political order, at least in the short run. This caution stems from the fact that politics cannot be reduced to the interaction of different political identities in civil society. The state plays a major role in shaping political identities; it shapes the way different interests are organized and articulated, and consequently the way different sectors perceive their interests and the way to pursue them.¹⁷ This is especially the case in Brazil, where the state has traditionally been strong and civil society has been weak. Paradoxically, while the importance of the grassroots movements lies in their ability to help strengthen civil society and challenge the elitist, statist traditions, the very existence of these traditions limits their capacity to do so.

Urban Popular Movements, the State and Political Culture

The great hopes stimulated by the grassroots movements which emerged in the second half of the 1970s must be understood in reference to Brazil's past history of elitism, populism, and corporatism. These movements were independent from and opposed to the authoritarian state. Furthermore, in contrast to most pre-'64 movements, they often had limited linkages to local politicians and to political parties. As a result, some analysts tended to see in these movements the hope of the future, the autonomous expression of the popular will, overlooking the extent to which they were shaped by outside political forces (the Church, the left) and by the state.

Despite the fact that the movements emerged in opposition to the state and often articulated an anti-state discourse, the relationship between movements and the state is very important. The more successful movements were oriented, from the beginning, towards obtaining material improvements for the local population, even if cultural, recreational, community, religious, or broader political motives such as the struggle for democracy were important. If the movements consistently failed to obtain any material objectives, there was a tendency towards demobilization. The great majority of grassroots participants were primarily concerned with resolving pressing needs in their own lives and were uninterested in participating in movements which were unable to help do this.

The effort to obtain material benefits for the local population almost always placed different state organs as the primary focus of demands of the grassroots popular movements. Thus, while often espousing an ideology of autonomy vis-à-vis the state, these movements had to face the state to meet their objectives. The importance of the state for these grassroots movements was not limited to conquering immediate material

demands. Movement leaders were generally committed to broader efforts to redemocratize the society. This commitment implied concern with changing the state.

Even if the most novel and interesting aspect of grassroots movements is their challenge to traditional political culture, their impact and future depends to a large extent on their capacity to affect the state. Especially in a society in which power is as centralized as it is in Brazil, the democratization of social relations at the grassroots level has no clear connection to the democratization of the state. To return to a theme developed so well by Max Weber (1964: 358-392), for change to be lasting it must be institutionalized. A society where power is so centralized, in turn, requires some linkages to dominant instances of power, principally the state and political parties.

The grassroots movements face a permanent tension also adumbrated by Weber, between innovation and institutionalization. The innovative side of the grassroots movements is their relative autonomy vis-à-vis the state, political parties, and politicians. But to institutionalize the kinds of changes they seek, these movements had to negotiate with the state and attempt to help transform the state. This concern with transforming the state eventually led to placing greater emphasis on political parties and linkages to politicians.

The concern with political parties evolved over time, but by the 1982 elections, social movements in the most developed parts of the country devoted considerable attention to the party question. In a society where politics has always been dominated by the state, parties assume great importance, not so much in their own right (the parties have themselves traditionally been weak) but because in a democratic system they are the means of assuming state power. Leaders of many grass roots popular movements felt that the best means of assuring greater public responsiveness to popular demands was to control part of the state apparatus. Therefore, in the 1982 elections, popular

movements launched candidates in the more developed urban areas (Mainwaring forthcoming).

Paradoxically, the very success of the grassroots movements in challenging traditional political practices eventually led them to become more exposed to these traditional practices. When the grassroots movements first emerged, the authoritarian regime generally ignored and/or repressed them. As the grassroots movements expanded and the electoral process became more important, however, the state was forced to develop a strategy to respond to them. At this point clientelistic practices became more widespread (Cammack 1982, Hagopian 1986).

It would be tempting to read the emergence of clientelistic practices as evidence of the impotence of grassroots popular movements, especially because in many cases these practices were relatively successful in demobilizing the movements or in creating parallel, more conservative movements. However, there is an alternative reading of the emergence of populism and clientelism.

Cooptation of an established movement implies some kind of exchange between the state and the movement. Until the mid-'70s, the military government was less concerned about developing clientelistic mechanisms to respond to social movements because it did not perceive cooptation as an important objective. The reason behind this was a basic unwillingness to negotiate with popular movements and to make concessions to the popular sectors. In this sense, the attempts to construct populist or clientelistic mechanisms represented a victory for the grassroots popular movements. Grassroots movements helped force the authoritarian regime to redefine its political strategy.

This was not the kind of victory the most optimistic analysts of the social movements had foreseen. These analysts had seen, tacitly or explicitly, a unilinear growth of the movements. In fact, every step along the path towards redemocratization created new dilemmas for the movements. For example, the 1982 elections magnified

internal tensions and conflicts in many movements, leading to a temporary or permanent demobilization.

These periods of demobilization and the ongoing tensions and dilemmas the movements have faced have led some observers to emphasize the "cyclical" character of grassroots movements. In many cases, the state's response to social movements reinforced a perception of the inefficacy of these movements. State leaders were generally interested in claiming credit for any improvements in urban services, rather than in allowing the popular movements to do so. Particularly under the authoritarian regime, the decision making process was closed, allowing for the appearance that there was no receptivity to public demands.

While the movements may demobilize, the notion of a cycle, in so far as it suggests that movements rise and die without effecting change beyond immediate and quite limited objectives, is questionable. The problem is that social movements cannot be viewed only in terms of their immediate impact (Kowarick 1984; Machado de Silva 1983). Political change is often a long, slow process, involving the gradual reshaping of social identities. Social movements can be important actors in this reshaping of social identities, both by affecting the identity of the individuals involved in the movements, and by changing the way other actors perceive the political world. In this sense, even if the movements can only claim limited and partial victories, they can help redefine the parameters of the political struggle. I would suggest that the fundamental importance of urban popular movements in the struggle for democracy was precisely to call attention to issues of popular participation and popular needs, as well as to help redefine popular identities. A given movement may die out or demobilize, yet still effect important changes in social relations and in the political system. Grassroots movements have offered an opportunity for popular participation in the political process. Even if an individual ceases to participate in a movement, his/her political views can be changed by the experience.

Despite the profound differences between the Brazilian experience and that of the advanced Western democracies, the role social movements played in these latter countries helps illustrate the point. Social movements, in particular the labor movement, faced a long uphill struggle. Only after many decades did they begin to conquer rudimentary political, social, and material rights. Nevertheless, they eventually helped redefine the political system (Thompson 1964). The urban popular movements of Brazil do not necessarily face such a favorable future--time will tell--but a long term perspective may help offset some of the pessimism which is sure to set in because of their current difficulties.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have suggested some of the reasons why grassroots popular movements did not challenge Brazil's historically elitist political system as thoroughly as many participants and analysts hoped they would. (1) Rather than a unity of diverse social movements, the tendency has been towards an extraordinary fragmentation of different movements, with few effective linkages between these movements and political institutions. Unity of social movements, except for specific demands and short term situations, is the exception rather than the rule. (2) The process of formation of a political identity is more complex than most analysts of social movements in Brazil (and many leading European theoreticians) had suggested. Developing a political identity that leads to participation in social movements is, again, the exception rather than the rule. There was never more than a small minority of people involved in social movements. (3) Rather than enhancing the unity of social movements, democratization increased competition among movements. The state became more concerned with these movements and devised strategies for coopting them. In addition,

the sphere of partisan politics became more important. Social movements always had experienced some internal divisions, but these divisions were magnified by internal competition over the partisan issues and by competition among different parties to win over the movements.

Of crucial importance if social movements are to become a more salient political factor, not only in Brazil but also anywhere, is constructing effective linkages to political institutions, especially parties. So far, efforts to do so in Brazil have not proven very successful. In opposition, most parties have tried to form alliances with social movements; in government, they have attempted to control them. The major exception, the Workers Party, has had limited electoral success.

While underscoring some of the limits of grassroots popular movements, I have also directed attention to ways in which they have been politically significant. The material conquests of these movements, albeit significant to the participants, have been limited and partial, especially relative to the amount of time and effort expended to get them. Nevertheless, urban popular movements have contributed to redefining the political arena in some important ways, particularly in increasing sensitivity to popular demands. These changes are certainly less dramatic than many people hoped for, but they suggest a partial erosion of the traditional elitism in Brazilian politics.

NOTES

- 1 The most important Brazilian contributions include Cardoso (1983) and Boschi (1983). Major theoretical reassessments also come from Castells (1983) and Katznelson (1981), pp. 193-218.
- 2 This point was first developed in the interesting article by Machado da Silva and Ziccardi (1980).
- 3 While correct in asserting the heterogeneity of the class base of urban social movements, paradoxically the Marxian literature exaggerated this point such that class conflict ceased to be a fundamental concept of analysis. Whereas they saw the labor movement in terms of class struggle, Lojkin (1980), Castells (1974 and 1980), Evers et al. (1981), Borja (1975), and their Brazilian adherents generally saw the main struggle in urban areas as the "people" (an undifferentiated category) versus the state. They failed to consider that contradictions among different urban social movements also express the class struggle. These authors influenced, and virtually shaped, Latin American thought on urban social movements. Brazilian statements that follow a similar line include Moisés (1978); and Somarriba, et al. (1984).
- 4 The wealthiest 10% of the population accounted for 50.6% of total income in 1981. World Bank (1983).
- 5 This heterogeneity and conflict raises the questions as to whether the category "grassroots popular movements" is too broad to be meaningful. Without entering into a philosophical discussion about when there is enough unity in a social category to justify its use, it is apparent that social categories must allow for some internal heterogeneity. The fact that the popular classes are in an inferior position in Brazilian society and form an identity which takes cognizance of this position imparts a broad enough similarity to justify the category of popular. The fact that all of these movements attempt to improve the lot of the popular sectors in the sphere of living (rather than working) conditions, in urban areas, justifies the notion of grassroots popular movements.
- 6 This theme is developed, although in a different way, by Tilly (1978).
- 7 Grassroots popular movements must be comprehended in part relative to broader patterns of popular culture. All too frequently, they are analyzed instead from the viewpoint of what the social scientist wants the popular classes to do, viz., attempt to democratize the society. Seen from this perspective, limited popular participation is an expression of alienation. Alienation, of course, exists, but seen from the perspective of the worldview of the popular classes, there are many good reasons not to participate in popular movements. Fundamental recent works on popular culture in Brazil include DaMatta (1985), Zaluar (1985), Magnani (1984), and Caldeira (1984).
- 8 On this point, I draw on the excellent work by Sahlins (1976).
- 9 For a critique of Gramsci and Althusser's discussion of ideology, see Lamounier (1974).
- 10 Maravall (1982) makes this argument with reference to Spain.

11 The discussion here draws upon my work and discussions with Eduardo Viola on the relationship between social movements and political culture. See Mainwaring and Viola (1984).

12 The literature that addresses this question is vast. For a critique of the classical liberal notion of political culture that posited free individuals, see Pateman (1971). For a critique of the liberal notion of interest, see Balbus (1971). Many symbolic anthropologists have also made important contributions along these lines. See for example Sahlins (1976) and Geertz (1973).

13 Of course, not all rational choice theory is oblivious of this fact. For a superb discussion of the formation of class identity, drawing upon Marxist theory and rational choice models, see Przeworski (1985), esp. pp. 47-98.

14 In her otherwise fine contribution, Doimo (1984) falls prey to this tendency, although not from a Church perspective.

15 Fundamental works on the question of citizenship in Brazil are Santos (1979); and Da Matta (1985), pp. 55-80. Among the classic works on the subject are Marshall (1965); and Bendix (1969).

16 On this issue, see the interesting article by Santos (1985). Santos is more sanguine than I that the strengthening of civil associations will erode the corporatist, elitist character of the Brazilian state.

17 In emphasizing the state's ability to shape identities and interest articulation, I diverge from the suggestive analysis of Touraine (1981), who considerably understates the state's importance as an autonomous actor in political life. In this regard, the analyses of Stepan (1978) and Schmitter (1974) are enlightening. Both underscore the state's role in shaping the organization of civil society.

18 The main Brazilian exponents of this position have been Boschi (1983) and Ferreira dos Santos (1981). In a similar vein O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) argue that social movements almost inevitably decline in the period following transitions to democracy. They seem to believe that institutionalized political channels (parties, the state, interest associations) become so dominant in democratic politics that less institutionalized channels (such as movements) lose their importance. There may be a tendency in this direction but I am not convinced that it is found in all cases. In fact, the Brazilian case challenges their argument; the labor and the peasant movements were generally more dynamic after March 1985 than they had been in the preceding years.

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