

THE SEQUENCING OF SUCCESS: ORGANIZING TEMPLATES AND NEOLIBERAL POLICY OUTCOMES*

Paul Almeida[†]

In the 1990s and early 2000s, government privatization and austerity programs served as the cornerstone of free market reforms implemented throughout the developing world. The selling off of government utilities, resources, and services laid the groundwork for a highly contested battleground in the global South over social and economic distribution. This study examines the sequencing of campaigns against neoliberal reforms in Central America. Two successful movement campaigns against privatization in El Salvador and Costa Rica followed failed collective attempts to impede similar economic reforms. The policy outcomes against neoliberal measures are explained by the path-dependent nature of the organizing templates activists chose to employ and the breadth of social movement unionism achieved. The article offers insights into similar battles currently waged in the third world over the pace of economic globalization and the conditions in which oppositional movements are likely to succeed or fail.

Economic liberalization in the developing world is driving campaigns of mass defiance against unwanted policies. The social and economic consequences of neoliberal reforms over the past twenty five years are well documented (Walton and Seddon 1994; Robinson 2003). Beginning with the foreign debt crisis of the early 1980s, dozens of states in the global South began to enact austerity policies. The first generation economic reforms of the 1980s included state subsidy reductions in basic food products and transportation, currency devaluations, wage freezes, removal of import tariffs, and privatization of government-run factories and enterprises (Green 2003). The economic liberalization measures derived from conditionality loans mandated by international financial institutions to renegotiate the foreign debt and curb inflation. By the mid-1980s, the austerity policies had generated a wave of economic-based protests throughout the developing world (Walton and Ragin 1990; Walton and Seddon 1994).

The 1990s witnessed a renewed effort to implement a second generation of economic reforms as the debt crisis remained unresolved. These second-phase reforms centered on the privatization of basic government services and utilities such as ports, power and water distribution, energy resources, health care, pensions, and telecommunications. As in the mid-1980s, the second generation neoliberal measures sparked a wave of protest throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Yet nowhere in the world have the protests reached such intensity as in Latin America (Almeida and Johnston 2006; Roberts 2008). Between the late 1990s and early 2000s, every Latin American and Caribbean country (with the possible exception of Cuba) experienced massive outpourings of popular dissent against privatization. In addition, privatization-related conflicts account for nearly 40 percent of all anti-neoliberal protests in Latin America (Almeida 2007).

* Previous versions of this paper were presented at the "Foro de Movimientos Sociales en Centroamérica: Algunas Experiencias" at the Universidad de Costa Rica in June 2007, the American Sociological Association (ASA) Annual Meetings in New York City in August 2007 and the XVII International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) in Montreal in September 2007. The author acknowledges the assistance of Dina Martínez, Roxana Delgado, Luis González, Sindy Mora, Carlos Sandoval, George Garcia, Allen Cordero, Ciska Raventós, Miguel Cruz and *Mobilization* reviewers.

[†] Please direct correspondence to Paul Almeida, Department of Sociology, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843-4351, email almeida@tamu.edu.