

Social Movements and Transnational Rule

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Social movements in Africa and elsewhere usually address institutions of the nation state. Yet in recent decades, many states have lost much of their sovereign autonomy. Contemporary social, economic and political life in Africa is governed by many and heterogeneous actors, originating from the local, the national and the international level, and being of both private and public nature. How do social movements adjust their activities, when the nation state has lost the competence to address their concerns? Transnational rule has been theorised most promisingly by, on the one hand, the liberal ‘global governance’ paradigm, and on the other hand in works based on Michel Foucault’s ideas on ‘governmentality’. However, both approaches contribute very little to the question of contestation and opposition beyond the nation state. Both concepts rather emphasise consensual relationships. Works based on the governance paradigm mostly deal with cooperation between governing institutions, while studies of governmentality analyse subjective agreement between rulers and ruled. Social movements, therefore, hold no theoretical place in the most influential political theories of globalisation.

In the African context, the relationship between social movements and internationalised rule dates back to at least the colonial period. In the decades after independence, social movements on the continent mostly addressed national governments. The period of structural adjustment programs, internationalised statebuilding and the impact of global justice movements seem to have contributed to a re-orientation on the side of newly emerged social movements. Drawing on both historical and contemporary case studies from the African context, as well as established social movement theory dealing mostly with non-African cases, the paper seeks to overcome theoretical shortcomings and desiderata in theories of international relations. It furthermore delineates a framework for the analysis of African social movements addressing or dealing with transnational rule.