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Beyond immigrant ethnic politics?

Organizational innovation, collaboration and competition in the Los Angeles immigrant rights movement (1980-2015)

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SUMMARY

In this dissertation I explored the factors and conditions that shaped the character, success and fragmentation of the immigrant rights movement in Los Angeles, California, during the period 1980-2015.

As I showed in introductory *chapters 1 and 2*, the recent history of Los Angeles offers a paradigmatic case of the challenges and opportunities of immigrant political incorporation under conflicting conditions of economic globalization and political nativism. Between the 1970s and 1990s, in the midst of economic restructuring, no other city in the United States underwent such an encompassing social and demographic transformation as a result of international migration. At the same time, few other cities experienced similar levels of socio-economic inequality, whereas newly arrived immigrants, often undocumented or in legally precarious situations, found themselves trapped at lowest rungs of the labor market. During this period, legal, ethno-racial and economic barriers at both the local and national level converged to frustrate immigrants' prospects of long-term inclusion, access to citizenship rights and upward social mobility.

Yet, in an unlikely turn of events, Los Angeles also emerged as an experiment in immigrant political activism that had no parallels in the country at the turn of the 21st century. Against the constraints that blocked their participation in institutional politics, immigrants resorted to expressing grievances and claims through contentious politics and grassroots mobilization. Immigrant organizations, in particular, played a key role in advancing the legal, social, economic and political standing of immigrant communities in Los Angeles and elsewhere.

This research and its guiding questions were thus inspired by those events. In particular, by three empirical puzzles which challenge important aspects of the literatures covering immigrant politics. First, in their early phases, the immigrant organizations under study appeared to defy conventional patterns of immigrant ethnic politics by promoting class-based solidarities, developing multi-ethnic alliances and articulating an intersectional understanding of immigrants' subaltern position in US society. Second, in spite of limited external support, those organizations proved capable of attaining considerable political victories and prominence. Third, when the movement matured and external support increased, such groups surprisingly drifted apart and abandoned their most innovative grassroots campaigns

In order to conduct this research, I divided this inquiry in three sub-questions that overlap with the three empirical puzzles described above. The first question asked what factors and conditions accounted for the emergence of those particular types of organizations in a setting traditionally dominated by ethnic and racialized forms of political mobilization and collective action. The second one interrogated the factors and conditions that, in spite of low financial resources, limited institutional backing and low support from local civil society actors, allowed immigrant organizations to mount

successful campaigns and gain visibility in local LA politics. The third question asked what factors and conditions led organizations to differentiate, and ultimately the movement to fragment under conditions of more open political and discursive opportunity structures and growing external support.

To answer those questions, I conducted a historical study of six prominent LA immigrant political organizations that were active during the period 1980s-2015. Those organizations are the following: the Instituto de Educación Popular del Sur de California (IDEPSCA), the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates (KIWA), the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA), the Pilipino Workers Center (PWC), the Garment Worker Center (GWC), and the Korean Resource Center (KRC). I based my empirical claims on evidence sourced from various organizational archives as well as from qualitative interviews with key informants.

The empirical chapters of this dissertation identified common organizational innovation, organizational strategic action and inter-organizational resource competition as key factors affecting organizational characteristics as well as dynamics of collaboration and conflict under changing external conditions. I argued that we can better understand immigrant organizations if we view them as both agents and products of 1) the environment in which they operate and 2) the relations to which they are part. Organizations depend for their survival and success on a wide range of social actors, and this dependence affects internal dimensions such as organizational identity- and goal-definition, structures and claim-making activities. Yet, unlike other groups, immigrant organizations are not only embedded in the local context, but also in a transnational space that contributes to influencing all these internal aspects. This dual relational lens helps us understand how organizations may be able to offset the obstacles presented by local hostile political and discursive opportunity structures.

In *chapter 3*, I showed how the transnational migration process was an important driver of organizational innovation, influencing both the ideology and practice of three different immigrant worker organizations (IDEPSCA, KIWA and PWC). My analysis singled out the importance of transnational processes of diffusion, as well as of mechanisms of ‘bounded solidarity’ in fostering the circulation and adaptation of external ideas to the context of immigrant Los Angeles.

In *Chapter 4*, together with Floris Vermeulen I introduced and discussed the concept of organizational legitimacy in the context of organizational emergence and survival. We showed its relevance for immigrant political organizations, as legitimacy and legitimation can help us understand how organizations establish themselves, strengthen their position and survive over long periods of time in spite of very limited material resources of their own.

In *chapter 5*, I examined how ideological orientations interplayed with support networks to drive two different immigrant organizations – KRC and KIWA – toward alternative ways of legitimating their existence and action (ethnic- vs. class-based).

Moreover, I showed how organizational leaders strategically tweaked their legitimation strategies in light of the changing discursive environment in order to attract further external support. Relying on the support of fringe actors – including second-generation immigrant students, small-scale foundations, individual activists and like-minded immigrant groups – immigrant organizations were able to survive their early phases and launch innovative advocacy campaigns.

In *chapter 6*, together with Walter Nicholls and Floris Vermeulen I provided a tentative explanation for the emergence, consolidation, and fragmentation of the Los Angeles immigrant workers rights movement over the last three decades. Drawing on a case study of the Multi-ethnic Immigrant Worker Organizing Network (MIWON) and of its member organizations, we contended that organizational collaboration is shaped by 1) forces that spur competition between organizations, 2) complementarity and alignment of organizational goals, and 3) ideologically grounded moral incentives that sustain collective action. Moreover, we argued that ultimate movement fragmentation was a reflection of the different ways in which those organizations, under conditions of growing dependence on the same set of resources, and under the pressure of new actors entering their sphere of organizational activity, tackled the challenges of surviving and maintaining or expanding their influence in the local activist and non-profit scene.

In *chapter 7*, I concluded by offering a summary of the key research findings and of how they contribute to answering the questions formulated in the introduction. I discussed the implications of the findings for future research and for our understanding of contemporary immigrant politics in California (and in the US more broadly). In particular, I suggested that the return to ‘ethnic politics’, the institutionalization of key LA immigrant organizations and the fragmentation of the local immigrant political landscape might prove formidable obstacles to the maintenance of an effective, cohesive and immigrant-led grassroots movement for social and economic justice.

SAMENVATTING

In dit proefschrift onderzoek ik de factoren en omstandigheden die het karakter, het succes en de versnippering van de migrantenrechtenbeweging in Los Angeles, Californië, hebben bepaald in de periode 1980-2015.

Zoals ik in de inleidende *hoofdstukken 1 en 2* laat zien, illustreert de recente geschiedenis van Los Angeles de uitdagingen en kansen voor de integratie van immigranten in een situatie van economische globalisering en politiek nativisme. Tussen de jaren zeventig en negentig, midden in de economische herstructurering, onderging geen enkele andere stad in de Verenigde Staten zo'n omvattende sociale en demografische transformatie als gevolg van internationale migratie. Tegelijkertijd ondervonden weinig andere steden vergelijkbare niveaus van sociaaleconomische ongelijkheid, terwijl nieuw aangekomen immigranten, vaak zonder papieren of in juridisch precare situaties, niet in staat waren hun zwakke positie op de arbeidsmarkt te verbeteren. Tijdens deze periode blokkeerden zowel juridische, etnische, raciale en economische barrières op lokaal en nationaal niveau de vooruitzichten van immigranten op integratie, toegang tot burgerschapsrechten en opwaartse sociale mobiliteit.

Verrassend genoeg is Los Angeles tegelijkertijd ook naar voren gekomen als een experiment van activisme, zowel door immigranten als op andere vlakken, die geen parallellen heeft in de Verenigde Staten aan het begin van de 21e eeuw. Tegenover de beperkingen die hun deelname aan de institutionele politiek blokkeerden, namen immigranten hun toevlucht tot het uiten van hun onvrede door de mobilisatie van de achterban. Immigrantenorganisaties speelden met name een sleutelrol bij het verbeteren van de juridische, sociale, economische en politieke status van immigrantengemeenschappen in Los Angeles en elders.

Dit onderzoek en de leidende vragen werden geïnspireerd door bovenstaande gebeurtenissen, en in het bijzonder door drie empirische puzzels die belangrijke aspecten van de literatuur over immigrantenpolitiek in twijfel trekken. Ten eerste lijken de onderzochte immigrantenorganisaties conventionele patronen van etnische immigratiepolitiek tegen te spreken door op klasse gebaseerde solidariteit te bevorderen, multi-etnische allianties te ontwikkelen en een intersectioneel begrip van de inferieure positie van immigranten in de Amerikaanse samenleving te verwoorden. Ten tweede blijken deze organisaties, ondanks beperkte externe steun, in staat om aanzienlijke politieke overwinningen en bekendheid te behalen. Ten derde raakten dergelijke groepen in toenemende mate van elkaar verwijderd en lieten zij hun meest innovatieve *grassroot*-campagnes en activiteiten achter zich op het moment dat de beweging volwassen werd en de externe steun toenam.

Om dit onderzoek uit te voeren heb ik het opgedeeld in drie deelvragen die overlappen met de drie empirische puzzels die hierboven zijn beschreven. De eerste vraag behandelt welke factoren en omstandigheden ons kunnen helpen verklaren waarom en

hoe dit soort organisaties zijn ontstaan in een omgeving die traditioneel wordt gedomineerd door etnische en raciale vormen van politieke mobilisatie en collectieve actie. De tweede vraag betreft de factoren en omstandigheden die, ondanks de beperkte financiële middelen, beperkte institutionele steun en lage steun van lokale actoren uit het maatschappelijk middenveld, immigrantenorganisaties in staat stelden om succesvolle campagnes op te zetten en zichtbaarheid te krijgen in de lokale politiek van Los Angeles. De derde vraag onderzoekt welke factoren en omstandigheden deze organisaties ertoe hebben gebracht zich van elkaar te differentiëren, en uiteindelijk de neiging tot fragmentatie tussen de organisaties, tijdens de toename van politieke kansen en externe steun.

Om deze vragen te beantwoorden heb ik een historische studie uitgevoerd naar de organisatorische ontwikkelingen in de periode 1980-2015 van zes prominente organisaties actief in de immigrantenpolitiek van Los Angeles. Deze organisaties zijn het Instituto de Educación Popular del Sur de California (IDEPSCA), de Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates (KIWA), het Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA), the Pilipino Workers Center (PWC), het Garment Worker Center (GWC), en het Korean Resource Center (KRC). Ik baseer mijn empirische beweringen op archiefmateriaal - zowel afkomstig van de organisaties zelf als uit openbare bronnen - alsmede op kwalitatieve interviews met belangrijke informanten.

De empirische hoofdstukken van dit proefschrift identificeren gemeenschappelijke organisatorische innovatie, strategisch organisatorisch handelen en onderlinge concurrentie om middelen als sleutelfactoren die zowel de organisatorische kenmerken als de dynamiek van samenwerking en conflicten onder veranderende externe omstandigheden beïnvloeden. Ik beargumenteer dat we immigrantenorganisaties beter kunnen begrijpen als we ze zien als zowel de aanjagers als het product van 1) de omgeving waarin zij opereren en 2) de relaties waartoe zij behoren. Voor hun voortbestaan en succes zijn organisaties afhankelijk van een breed scala aan sociale actoren, en deze afhankelijkheid beïnvloedt interne dimensies zoals het definiëren van identiteit en doelen, de formulering en motivering van de claims die door de organisatie worden gemaakt, evenals interne besluitvormingsstructuren. Toch zijn immigrantenorganisaties, in tegenstelling tot veel andere groepen, niet alleen ingebed in de lokale context, maar ook in een transnationale ruimte die bijdraagt aan het vormgeven van hun sociale, politieke en culturele karakter. Dit dubbele relationele aspect helpt ons te begrijpen hoe organisaties de lokale vijandige politieke en discursieve omstandigheden kunnen neutraliseren.

In *hoofdstuk 3*, laat ik zien hoe het transnationale migratieproces organisatorische innovatie stimuleerde, en zowel de ideologie als de praktijk van drie verschillende organisaties voor immigrantenarbeid (IDEPSCA, KIWA en PWC) beïnvloedde. Mijn analyse is met name gericht op het belang van transnationale diffusieprocessen, evenals

mechanismen van 'gebonden solidariteit' bij het bevorderen van de circulatie en aanpassing van externe ideeën aan de context van immigratie in Los Angeles.

In *hoofdstuk 4*, behandel ik samen met Floris Vermeulen het belang van organisatorische legitimiteit in het ontstaan en voortbestaan van organisaties. Dit hoofdstuk laat zien dat legitimiteit zeer relevant is voor politieke immigrantenorganisaties, omdat dit ons kan helpen begrijpen hoe organisaties zich vestigen, hun positie versterken en kunnen blijven voortbestaan, ondanks zeer beperkte eigen materiële middelen.

In *hoofdstuk 5*, onderzoek ik hoe de interactie tussen ideologische oriëntaties en ondersteunende netwerken twee verschillende immigrantenorganisaties – KRC en KIWA – heeft bewogen tot verschillende manieren van legitimiteit (etniciteit en klasse). Bovendien liet ik zien hoe organisatieleiders hun legitimatiestrategieën aanpasten in het licht van de veranderende discursieve omgeving om verdere externe steun aan te trekken. Met de steun van marginale actoren - waaronder tweede generatie studenten, kleinschalige stichtingen, individuele activisten en gelijkgestemde immigrantengroepen - konden immigrantenorganisaties in hun beginperiode overleven en innovatieve campagnes lanceren.

In *hoofdstuk 6*, geef ik samen met Walter Nicholls en Floris Vermeulen een voorzichtige verklaring voor de opkomst, consolidatie en fragmentatie van de migrantenarbeidersbeweging van Los Angeles in de afgelopen drie decennia. Op basis van een casestudy van het Multi-ethnic Immigrant Worker Organizing Network (MIWON) en de organisaties die lid zijn van dit netwerk, betogen we dat de organisatorische samenwerking gevormd wordt door 1) krachten die de concurrentie tussen organisaties stimuleren, 2) complementariteit en afstemming van organisatiedoelstellingen, en 3) ideologisch gefundeerde morele prikkels die collectieve actie ondersteunen. Bovendien betogen we dat de uiteindelijke fragmentatie van de beweging een weerspiegeling is van de verschillende manieren waarop de organisaties, in tijden van toenemende afhankelijkheid van dezelfde middelen en onder druk van nieuwe actoren op hun gebied van activiteit, trachtten te overleven en hun invloed in de lokale activistische en non-profit scene te consolideren of uit te breiden.

In *hoofdstuk 7*, concludeer ik met een samenvatting de belangrijkste onderzoeksresultaten en leg uit hoe deze bijdragen aan het beantwoorden van de vragen geformuleerd in de inleiding. Ik bespreek de implicaties van de bevindingen voor toekomstig onderzoek en voor ons begrip van de hedendaagse immigrantenpolitiek in Californië (en in de VS meer in het algemeen). Ik stel in het bijzonder voor dat de terugkeer naar 'etnische politiek', de institutionalisering van belangrijke LA-immigrantorganisaties en de versnippering van het politieke landschap van de lokale immigranten enorme obstakels zouden kunnen vormen voor het behoud van een effectieve, samenhangende en door immigranten geleide basisbeweging voor sociale en economische rechtvaardigheid.

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