

From Mobilization to Institutionalization

Persistence and Change within the Social Movement Field*

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Abstract

Why has the Social Movement remained a widely used form of collective action for two hundred years? Why do collective actors not adopt other, perhaps more successful, forms instead? I argue that social movement theorists have inherited an antiquated conception of institutions from the early-20th century Collective Behavior theorists that has inhibited our understanding of the processes that have sustained this so-called “extra-institutional” form of collective action for two hundred years. As a corrective I offer definitions of institutions and institutionalization drawn from the Sociology of Culture and propose the concept of the *social movement field* – encompassing all social movements, movement participants, regulatory agencies, donors, allies, allied media, support groups, and opponents. It is here, I argue, within this relatively autonomous field of overlapping social relations and common institutional orientations, that the social movement has obtained a stable and shared meaning and persisted for so long. I further discuss implications for future research and draw upon evidence in the social movements literature that supports this institutional field perspective on social movements.

Sociological theories say that social movements occur because people lack routine access to political institutions. If they had routine access, it is implied, people would adopt some other form of collective action, perhaps a political party or lobbying group. This answer rests on a particular view of institutions and makes a strong assumption that social movements lie outside of them. In fact, sociologists have long considered movements to be “extra-institutional” affairs, from the earliest collective behavior theories to the Contentious Politics theories of today. Yet, despite its marginal existence, the social movement has survived two hundred years of turbulent and contentious history. It is persistent and widespread. One architect of the Contentious Politics approach made this point long ago. In *From Mobilization to Revolution*, Charles Tilly (1978) argued that each period and place is characterized by a common repertoire of collective action (later dubbed the “repertoire of contention” [Tilly 1995]) with which “outsiders” to political institutions may make claims on authorities. The current repertoire of contention, he writes, is expressed in the grassroots campaigns of social movements, in the “creation of special-purpose associations and coalitions, public meetings, solemn processions, vigils, rallies, demonstrations, petition drives, statements to and in public media, and pamphleteering” (2004: 3-4). Since it first emerged at the end of the eighteenth century, the social movement has spread to every continent and country in which democratic institutions exist (Tilly 2004: 80). Rather surprising for an “extra-institutional” form.

Why do people form social movements when they want to see social change? Social movement theories have at various times attributed their emergence to socio-structural strains, mobilization of resources, and expanding political opportunities. But why should these things lead to social movements *and not some other form of collective action?* That we

continue to see them appear over and over, utilized by a wide variety of people and in remarkably diverse settings, suggests that the social movement is in fact not “extra-institutional,” but is (and has long been) an institutionalized form. This, however, is to use the term in a different sense than social movement theorists have, one more compatible with developments in other areas of Sociology. An institution as used here is akin to a social fact, a socially constructed reality that exists outside of any one person and has an inevitability and permanence that gives it a life of its own. Institutions, however, do not exist alone or in isolation from their social environment. They are embedded in spheres of social action that give them meaning and durability, what some have called “fields.” Field theories, as advanced by cultural and organizational sociologists (e.g., DiMaggio and Powell 1983, Bourdieu 1984) suggest that within these more or less autonomous social arenas actors are oriented to the same set of institutions that condition which behavior they think is appropriate, expedient, and indeed possible. The people who populate social movements may not have their hands on the levers of government and may lack the legitimacy of political elites, but the political field is only one among many fields. Social movements might be marginal to the political field (as can be observed in their marginal success), but they appear to be embedded in another field – a *social movement field* – that gives them form and meaning and that keeps them coming back time and again to the same model of collective action.

The nature of my argument in this paper is twofold – one part conceptual, one part theoretical. Conceptually, I argue that social movement theorists have inherited a view of institutions from the Collective Behavior theorists of the early-20th century that has precluded opportunities for social movement theories to contribute to broader sociological

debates. Theoretically, and as a consequence of this conceptual obstacle, we have overlooked the *multidimensionality* of institutions and the *ongoing processes* of institutionalization that have sustained and continue to shape this two hundred year-old form of collective action. To rectify this situation, I argue for a reconceptualization of social movements as institutions and propose that the remarkable persistence of this form can be best understood in the context of the social movement field. It is here in the interactions among social movement organizations, regulatory bodies, independent media, charitable foundations, police departments, and informal networks of activists that the social movement has become an institutionalized form.

1. Institutions in the Study of Social Movements

The sociological study of institutions is as diverse as it is old. Weber studied bureaucracy, Marx capitalism, and Durkheim the collective representations of groups. For Talcott Parsons, Robert Merton, and other functionalists of mid-century, institutional stability and persistence were the cornerstones of social systems. Definitions have varied over time and across disciplines (Scott 2001), but within the collective behavior and social movement tradition institutions have long remained a point of contrast against which movements can be understood. That is, social movements themselves are not institutions. This view of social movements as non-institutional things can be traced to the collective behavior studies of the early twentieth century.

The earliest sociological theories of collective behavior viewed social movements as the organic products of non-institutionalized settings. From LeBon's (1896) famous statement of crowd mentality to Blumer's (1966) distinction between elementary and routine

collective behavior and Turner and Killian's (1987) theory of emergent norms, collective behavioralists argued that social movements find their roots outside of institutionalized structures and cultural models of behavior (McPhail 1991). For some, being outside of institutions defined collective behavior. Turner and Killian (1987:3), for instance, wrote that collective behavior is "those forms of social behavior in which usual conventions cease to guide social action and people collectively transcend, bypass, or subvert institutional patterns and structures." This they inherited from their teacher at the University of Chicago, Herbert Blumer, whose own theories situated the origins of social movements in a form of "elementary" collective behavior – which he termed *unrest* – in which routines are disrupted or new impulses cannot be accommodated by existing institutions. "Blumer argued that people in a condition of social unrest are seeking something but do not know what it is. They are aimless, engage in random and erratic behavior, are apprehensive about the future, are vaguely excited, and are particularly vulnerable to rumors" (McPhail 1991: 10). Movements, in the Collective Behavior tradition, are therefore independent of one another and develop in ways peculiar to each situation.¹

¹ It is worth noting that Herbert Blumer (1966) did recognize some institutional aspects of social movements. He wrote that social movements eventually reach an "institutional stage" in which "the movement has crystallized into a fixed organization with a definite personnel and structure to carry into execution the purposes of the movement" (203). Institutionalization, he argues, is made possible in part by the use of ritual – e.g., rallies, demonstrations, parades, slogans, uniforms, and songs – which creates a shared identity and ideology, what he calls *esprit de corps*. Yet, this apparent exception proves the rule. For Blumer, as for other collective behavioralists, institutions may be a product of collective behavior but the reverse is never true.

Structurally-minded sociologists of mid-century, however, saw a causal role for institutions in the study of social movements, namely in their disruption or breakdown. Whether rapid industrialization, mass unemployment, wars, or growing social and economic inequality, they argued that broad socio-structural “strains” spur social movements into existence. Under the weight of these strains and the resulting emotional pressure, individuals shed the niceties of institutional life for the unruliness of social movements. Exemplifying this approach, Neil Smelser (1962: 73) built this into his very definition of collective behavior: “According to our definition, any instance of collective behavior must contain the following: (a) uninstitutionalized (b) collective action, (c) taken to modify a condition of strain (d) on the basis of a generalized reconstitution of a component of action.” He underscores the point, adding, “Collective behavior, as we shall study it, is not institutionalized behavior. According to the degree to which it becomes institutionalized, it loses its distinctive character. It is behavior ‘formed or forged to meet undefined or unstructured situations’” (8-9; quoting Blumer). While social movements may occasionally make use of institutions, Smelser does not include these institutionalized aspects in his value-added model of social movements. Rituals, he acknowledges, may reaffirm the values and symbols of social movements, but because this does not fit his definition of collective behavior, which is uninstitutionalized, these components of movements are beyond the scope of his analysis (74-75). William Kornhauser (1959: 227), explicating his version strain theory, reflects a similar orientation when he argues, “Mass politics occurs when large numbers of people engage in political activity outside of the procedures and rules instituted by a society to govern political action.” This distinction between mass and institutionalized

politics typifies the view of social movements as extra-institutional things and it portends the paradigm that came to replace it.

The Contentious Politics perspective has emerged as the dominant approach to studying movements in the last few decades. Some have gone so far as to call it the “hegemonic paradigm” in the field (Goodwin and Jasper 1999: 28). It has brought together elements of the Resource Mobilization and Political Process perspectives, emphasizing such concepts as organizations, informal networks, collective action frames, resource mobilization, repertoires of contention, and political opportunities (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1986; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). Typical of this view is Tarrow’s (1998: 67) assertion that “contentious politics organizes on the boundaries of institutions and is never truly accepted by institutional elites.” Indeed, that is precisely why regular people use them: “Collective action becomes contentious when it is used by people who lack regular access to institutions...Contentious collective action is the basis of social movements...because it is the main and often the only recourse that ordinary people possess against better-equipped opponents or powerful states” (Tarrow 1998: 3).

This state-centric view of movements has colored the way we understand institutions. To say that social movements are becoming more institutionalized has come to mean that they are becoming more like political insiders – political parties, interest groups, lobbying firms, political action committees. Meyer and Tarrow’s (1998) “movement society” hypothesis hinges on this definition. They argue that in the process of becoming more institutionalized, movements are replacing disruptive forms of protest with more conventional forms (rallies, petitions, marches), and once disruptive forms are now becoming conventional. Koopmans (1993) too charts the tendency of some social

movement organizations at the end of a protest cycle to abandon protest for what he calls “institutional” forms. In this same vein, Klandermans et al. (1998) examine the “institutionalization” of the African National Congress, a key organization in the antiapartheid movement, as it took control of the South African government. The common imagery in these studies is of “non-institutional” challengers making their way into the realm of “institutional” politics (see also McAdam et al. 2005).

The language of “insiders” and “outsiders,” “members” and “challengers,” reveals a persistent belief in the field that institutions have doors that are closed to some people who would otherwise have routine access to political decision-makers. For contentious politics theorists, the state (and sometimes more broadly the polity) is the most important institution for social movements. It is often treated as a highly institutionalized organization, reified and immutable. Although actors come and go, alliances are forged and dissolved, and repression rises and falls, but in most accounts of social movements the structures of the state rarely change (with important exceptions, e.g., Tilly 1995; Hipsher 1998; Markoff 1996).

More recently, McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) have written that they want to challenge the boundary drawn by classical social movement theories between institutionalized and noninstitutionalized politics. In doing so, however, they reify the distinction. The authors propose to replace the institutional/non-institutional distinction with one of “contained” contention, involving parties “previously established as constituted political actors” prior to the conflict, in contrast to “transgressive” contention, in which “at least some parties are newly self-identified political actors, and/or...employ innovative collective action.” They add, “Action qualifies as innovative if it incorporates claims, selects objects of claims, includes collective self-representations, and/or adopts means that are

either unprecedented or forbidden with the regime in question” (7-8). Social movements, in this view, are of the latter sort: transgressive. While this appears to move away from the categories of institutional and noninstitutional, it does little more than dress old characters in new clothes. Political insiders are still opposed to their challengers and social movements are still the newcomers with their illegitimate claims, marginal identities, and inferior political means. Moreover, they are still at the margins of the same institution, the state.

We are left with a legacy that presupposes the persistence of institutions rather than examines it, and one that too often does not define what it means by institutions. If we are going build theories of social movements that recognize their institutionalized aspects, we should first define what we mean by institutions and institutionalization.

2. Recasting Institutions

Institutions as Structure and Process

The long and often disjointed study of institutions in Sociology has left a rich trail of crumbs. Rather than following that trail here we can rely on the extensive work of theorists who have found some unity and coherence in this area of study (for useful reviews, see Scott 2001; DiMaggio and Powell 1991). At times the attention of sociologists has fallen on institutions as highly *structured* things, and at others precedence has been given to *processes* of institutionalization. In a helpful attempt to unify the two Ronald Jepperson (1991: 145) offers the following definition:

Institution represents a social order or pattern that has attained a certain state or property; *institutionalization* denotes the process of such attainment. By

order or *pattern*, I refer, as is conventional, to standardized interaction sequences. An institution is then a social pattern that reveals a particular reproduction process. When departures from the pattern are counteracted in a regulated fashion, by repetitively activated, socially constructed, controls—that is, by some set of rewards and sanctions—we refer to a pattern as institutionalized.

Persistence, as is typical, is a central feature of this definition, as is indicated by the terms “social order,” “pattern,” and “standardized interaction sequences.” This gives it the appearance – and durability – of a social structure. Yet, he asserts that this structure must be “repetitively activated” or “regulated” in order to retain this constancy, and he points us to the social “controls” that confer rewards and sanctions. This conceptualization of an institution as both structure and process is important because it implies that no institution is immutable. That is, if we accept that processes of institutionalization do not always perfectly reproduce institutions, then we open the way for a theory of institutional change (Sewell 1992; Clemens and Cook 1999).

The nature of social controls has been the focus of considerable debate among students of institutions. W. Richard Scott’s (2001) identifies three broad types of controls believed by sociologists to drive institutional reproduction. *Regulatory* controls derive from formal rules, laws, and regulations and take the form of explicit coercion to comply. They are frequently written, explicit, and have the backing of agents or agencies that have the capacity to vigorously enforce these rules. *Normative* controls depend on informal rules of appropriateness which, if broken, undermine one’s perceived legitimacy and can result in

strained or broken relations or even organizational failure. They may or may not be written rules, but they are explicitly understood and shared among a community of connected actors. *Cultural-cognitive* controls operate subconsciously as taken-for-granted rules that seem natural and immutable, and are usually only noticed when they are broken. Violating these rules can be difficult if one knows of no other way to behave, but when a violation does occur it can cause disruption, confusion, and even hostility. Although all three types of social controls appear to be significant for understanding the dynamics of fields, sociologists have tended to study the normative and cognitive-cultural components, leaving the regulatory mechanisms to economists, political scientists, and some rational-choice sociologists (Scott 2001; Hirsch 1997).

The Duality of Institutions

William Sewell, Jr. (1992), building on the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens (1979), has elegantly elaborated a definition of “social structures,” which for our purposes we may understand as interchangeable with “institutions.” His ideas add dimensionality to our conception of institutions by arguing that they are characterized by a “duality of schemas and resources.” By duality he means that they are mutually constitutive; shared cognitive schemas give meaning and value to resources, while at the same time those resources give form and durability to schemas (Mohr and Duquenne 1997 make a similar argument). “Sets of schemas and resources may properly be said to constitute *structures* only when they mutually imply and sustain each other over time” (13). So, like Jepperson, Sewell sees institutions as dynamic things, constantly being reproduced. Should this process of co-constitution fail – i.e., schemas and resources no longer empower one another – then

institutions may change or, as occasionally happens, disappear altogether. It follows that the more that socially constructed controls (sets of rewards and sanctions) successfully reproduce the duality of an institution, the more “institutionalized” we can say it is.

This leads us to further questions, as yet unanswered by our scholarship, about the dual nature of the social movement form (i.e., its constituent resources and schemas) and the social controls that confer rewards and sanctions to sustain it. Once we cast off the misleading dichotomy of structure *versus* culture we can begin to look at the role of culture, or schemas, in constituting movements’ resources, networks, organizations, tactical repertoires, and political opportunities, and the role of resources in empowering frames, identities, and feelings of efficacy and optimism. Resources, of course, have been a mainstay in the Resource Mobilization theories of social movements. Cress and Snow (1996) have gone to some length to develop a typology of resources that constitute a social movement. The breadth of their categories is noteworthy, including not only people, money, and other material goods, but also human capital, moral endorsements, and other symbolic resources that do not quite fit the definition of a schema. To take a couple of examples, a supportive statement by an external organization is a resource, but would be of little value without a corresponding understanding of that organization’s social relevance, legitimacy, and power to consecrate. A public rally requires many resources – speakers, audience, stage, public address system, placards and banners – which reflect but also call forth a cultural understanding of what is going on here. Under what conditions will we recognize this as the rally of a social movement and not a religious revival or electoral campaign? It is difficult to talk about such resources without simultaneously considering the schemas that create and are created by them. This is the “dual” character of institutions.

For Sewell (1992: 7-8), the term schema encompasses many things:

“not only the array of binary oppositions that make up a given society’s fundamental tools of thought, but also the various conventions, recipes, scenarios, principles of action, and habits of speech and gesture built up with these fundamental tools...What I mean to get at is not formally stated prescriptions but the informal and not always conscious schemas, metaphors, or assumptions presupposed by such formal statements.”

The social movement includes many such schemas. The “recipe” for a rally or a press conference is widely available and transposable, as studies of repertoires have taught us (Tilly 1978; Tarrow 1998). What they have said less about are the conditions under which schemas become more or less dissociated from resources. When these become increasingly dissociated from one another we may then see a change in the institution (Sewell 1996). The extent of this change, of course, depends on the degree to which social controls can preserve existing arrangements before new social controls arise to firmly establish the new form. The term “activist” also evokes a schema. A person may be recognized as a social movement activist if she attends or organizes public collective action events and behaves in particular ways. This too is subject to change when social controls are weak and the schema becomes disconnected from the resources that sustain it. The existence of an “activist directory” in a city reflects a generalized understanding among self-identified “activists” of what that term means. A directory is itself a resource that diffuses information about social movements and a schema of what kinds of events or organizations an activist may participate in.

Organizations have long been viewed as a resource but only recently have they been recognized also as schemas infused with meaning, value, and identity. Clemens (1993: 771) writes, “As a group organizes in a particular way, adopts a specific model of organization, it signals its identity both to its own members and to others. Models of organization are part of the cultural tool kit of any society and serve expressive or communicative as well as instrumental functions.” Polletta (2002) has usefully demonstrated the importance of identity for one particular form of organization, participatory democracy, in the Civil Rights Movement as black participants pushed to replace it when they associated it with white imposition in what they thought should be a black-led movement.

It is important to emphasize an often overlooked lexical distinction in the use of this word, institution. Social movement theorists – and they are not alone in this regard (Scott 2001: 8-10) – conceptualize institutions as *arenas* within which social activity unfolds. It makes sense then that they speak of being inside or outside of an institution. In this view, an institution is a self-contained social system, a complex organization of sorts. Within the boundaries of an institution, behavior is regular and patterned, rules are known and enforced, norms are followed, and deviations from these patterns and expectations are grounds for expulsion. Examples of institutions in this view include the State, higher education, and the Catholic Church. In contrast, the view of institutions outlined by Jepperson and Sewell that we adopt here is much broader. *Any* social pattern comprised of mutually reinforcing schemas and resources that is repeatedly regulated through rewards and sanctions is considered an institution. We can now speak of acting upon or be acted upon by an institution. The appropriate metaphor here is the totem. A totem embodies shared meanings and common expectations that take physical shape in material objects and social

relations, and is reinforced through periodic rituals and patterned interactions (Durkheim [1912] 1995). Symbols, rituals, and ceremonies enact and reinvigorate social institutions. Examples include the handshake, May Day, football, and the demonstration. Arenas such as the polity and the State may be more or less institutionalized, but they are also composed of many institutions, such as the parliament, Robert's Rules of Order, voting, and the national flag. The distinction is important if we are to talk about the context of an institution.

Institutions in Context: The Importance of Fields

Actors enact institutionalized models – sometimes consciously, sometimes not, sometimes accurately, sometimes not – when they seem appropriate for a given context (Sewell 1992). The implication is that actors must comprehend the action, the context, and the appropriateness of their combination. What is appropriate in one context may challenge the accepted ways of thinking, organizing, and acting in another. This is because institutions are not randomly distributed. They are embedded in and may take on very different meanings in different social contexts (Douglas 1966; Friedland and Alford 1991; Clemens 1997). When one deviates too far from an institutionalized model, social controls are activated to punish the offender.

In their thinking about institutions and contexts, sociologists have begun to elaborate the concept of “fields,” also called niches, arenas, games, worlds, ecologies, or institutional spaces (Long 1958; Bourdieu 1984, 1993; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Friedland and Alford 1991; Fligstein 1990; Hannan, Carroll, and Pólos 2003; Levi-Martin 2003; Abbott 1988; Becker 1982). Although each term comes with its own theoretical history, emphases, and commitments, for our purposes it is enough to note their general agreement that human

societies are composed of relatively autonomous domains of social action within which actors are oriented toward a similar set of institutions and social relations. Fields themselves can be more or less institutionalized. Many studies have examined the development of fields with an eye toward their “crystallization” – i.e., the point at which they become highly institutionalized (e.g., DiMaggio 1991; Scott et al. 2000; Armstrong 2002, 2005; Lounsbury et al. 2003). Fields can have a local or global reach that may or may not be tied to geography. There is no agreement about which or how many fields exist, but the number and diversity of studies of various fields suggest that they are profuse.

Fields are characterized by dominant actors, challengers, and their respective institutional “logics.” Friedland and Alford (1991) describe logics as the “organizing principles” of a field. Logics define the rules of the game, delineate the relevant players, specify the relevant authorities, shape identities, goals, strategies, and norms. Bourdieu (1984) captures this concept in his “cultural capital,” each form of which has cachet in a particular field. Some scholars find that a single institutional logic dominates a field at any given time, often to be replaced by another in successive stages of field transformation (e.g., Fligstein 1990; Friedland and Alford 1991; Scott et al. 2000). In San Francisco’s gay and lesbian field, for example, Armstrong (2002) detects at least three dominant logics since the 1950s that shaped, among other things, when social movement activity seemed most appropriate for people in the gay and lesbian community. Some institutional logics, she finds, are not as amenable to public protest as others. Others see multiple, often conflicting, logics existing side by side and indeed constituting one another (e.g., Bourdieu 1984, 1988, 1993; Mohr and Guerra-Pearson forthcoming). In his study of the field of French academics of the late-1960s, Bourdieu (1988) identifies two distinct and conflicting logics

that differentiate those professors who defended and those who defected from the academy in May of '68.

There appear to be at least two metaphors of fields in the literature, one akin to a playing field, the other a magnetic field. The former evokes an image of a social space circumscribed by boundaries within which actors may roam. This version draws the analyst's attention to field boundaries and forces them to make what can sometimes be very difficult distinctions between inside and outside, members and non-members. Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) approach is exemplary. Although his focus is on the structure of the field and its correspondence with actors' dispositions ("habitus"), he emphasizes processes of boundary construction and maintenance by an established group of field specialists who hold a wealth of cultural capital. The second metaphor casts fields as a magnetic force within which anyone or anything in its grasp is pulled. The analyst's attention is therefore drawn to the source of field effects, and field boundaries, if recognized at all, become gradually more blurred as distance from the source increases. The question of who or what is inside a field then becomes an empirical question: Who or what is subject to its effects? John Meyer's world polity approach is exemplary. Countries increasingly come to resemble one another – e.g., by adopting policies or institutions – as they become more connected to the world polity, the often very abstract source of field effects (Meyer 1977; see also Levi Martin 2003).

The theory of isomorphism advanced by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) draws on both metaphors by first analytically delimiting field boundaries and then examining the pressures on actors to conform. In their view, a field is defined as “those organizations that in the aggregate constitute a recognized area of social life: key suppliers, resource and product

consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products” (148). Once the relevant organizations have been identified, the analysis can then move to the isomorphic dynamics among them. Institutions within a field promote isomorphism, or similarity, among actors by way of coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures enforced by the state, other powerful actors, and by peers with whom one identifies. Institutions are “carried” by symbolic systems (e.g., rules, laws, values, categories, schemas), relational systems (e.g., governance systems, authority systems, shared identities), routines (e.g., standard operating procedures, roles, scripts), and artifacts (e.g., seatbelts, DVD technology, flags) (Scott 2001: 77-83). These carriers may be field specific or they may span several fields. The State, for example, plays a unique role in regulating multiple fields. To the extent that actors within a social domain are oriented toward a similar set of institutions and respond more to structurally equivalent actors than to those in other domains, we can say that a field exists.

The conceptual tools developed thus far offer a stepping stone for reorienting the field of social movement studies to address many of the critiques of current research while maintaining continuity with past research inspired by the Contentious Politics paradigm. Why do social movements emerge? It is the defining question of this field of study, yet Contentious Politics theorists have been conspicuously silent about why other forms do not emerge instead. That paradigm has not been able to explain the persistence of the social movement form for the last two hundred years. Yet, this is just one question – albeit a fundamental one – that is highlighted when we think about institutions and fields. Why do elites (traditionally political “insiders”) sometimes adopt social movement strategies? Why does a movement continue to use a tactic that has repeatedly failed to advance its goals?

Under what conditions do dominant actors and logics yield to challengers? Why do some social movements (or SMOs) adopt an available master frame while others do not? Why do groups on both the political Left and Right adopt similar forms in their challenges?

As others have argued (Armstrong and Bernstein 2007), the institutionalist's toolkit also encourages an expansion of our attention to new fields of action beyond the political, and highlights the pervasive nature of culture in social movements, their targets, and social environments. In the next section we consider how this approach may help us to uncover the processes that sustain the social movement as an institutionalized form, and propose new questions and new predictions for the study of social movements.

3. The Social Movement Field

Which field or fields matter for the social movement? For those who have recently taken up the field metaphor to study movements, there is little agreement. In fact, for each study published there is a different field proposed – a “civil rights field” in the post-WWII U.S. South (McAdam and Scott 2005); a “gay and lesbian field” in late-20th century San Francisco (Armstrong 2002); local “political fields” in Bombay and Calcutta (Ray 1998); a post-1960s “U.S. solid waste field” (Lounsbury et al. 2003). Yet, these studies suffer from the same “extra-institutional” misconception of movements that has dogged social movement theories for more than a century and as a consequence they too cannot explain why social movements emerge instead of other forms of collective challenge. Furthermore, because their analyses are confined to a single social movement they overlook the similarities of movements across fields and the social controls that reproduce them.

I propose that the social movement is not simply a peripheral actor in multiple institutional fields (although it may also be that), but an institution within a field of its own, itself constituting a “recognized area of social life” (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). As such, the similarity in form of such disparate movements as those for civil rights in the U.S., national independence in India, abolition of slavery in England, indigenous rights in Guatemala, and land reform in the Philippines is the product of social controls within the social movement field that have continued to reproduce the social movement’s dual nature (its schemas and resources).

The social movement exists in the organizations and collective identities of challengers, their informal networks and alliances with elites, and their interactions with the regulatory bodies, enforcement agencies, and charitable foundations that provoke, constrain, and encourage them. The field includes all those involved in all social movements and countermovements, the organizations that supply them with personnel, intermittent participants and donors, regulatory agencies (e.g., police, government agencies, security firms), independent news media, organizational directories, conferences, events calendars, contract laborers, legal advisors, and even service providers. It occasionally includes participating churches, ecumenical groups, politicians, celebrities, interest group organizations, labor unions, political parties. The field encompasses those that provide them with resources, which may include the participants named above, but may also entail non-participants (foundations, universities, businesses). Many organizations in the SM field provide resources of a sort that is not specific to any one movement but can be used by many movement organizations; they may provide tactical training, counseling for participants, equipment for public rallies, coalition strategies, or website design and

computer skills; they may publish calendars of events, news reports, or provide food; they may run workshops to develop organizing and meeting skills, provide legal support or counseling, or facilitate coalition-building; sometimes they provide entertainment. Not everyone within the SM field is necessarily happy about this form of popular politics. Police departments, security firms, and federal law enforcement agencies regulate movements' public activities and work to keep protest within the boundaries of the familiar and the legally and politically acceptable. This includes issuing permits for events, providing escorts for marches and security at rallies, and the occasional headline-grabbing flurry of arrests and intimidation tactics. This diverse array of organizational forms and actors are all oriented toward the same set of institutions and relations and each has a stake in the social movement field and a hand in its persistence.

It is worthwhile to distinguish between the kinds of institutional fields that we are talking about here and some similar concepts already used in social movement research. Curtis and Zurcher (1973: 53) coined the term "multi-organizational field" to refer to social networks "established by joint activities, staff, boards of directors, target clientele, resources...multiple affiliations of members." The multi-organizational field refers to *direct* relations among organizations, whether those relations are the result of shared members, resource flows, or some other direct interaction between them. In contrast, when institutional theorists talk of fields they may include direct network ties, but usually they refer to *indirect* relations in which actors occupy similar kinds of relational positions and are oriented toward a similar set of institutions and relations. There is no need, as John Levi Martin (2003) puts it, to see "hard particles whamming into one another" to recognize that a field exists. Fields may not be directly visible, but their effects most certainly are.

McCarthy and Zald's (1977) "social movement sector" (SMS), defined as all social movement organizations across all social movements, also approximates a social movement field. The SMS, however, is narrower than the field, excluding as it does anything other than SMOs – e.g., police and regulatory agencies, individual participants, donors, service providers, opponents, independent media, and the like. Although resource providers, police, and political allies and opponents are important components of the Contentious Politics framework, there is little or no consideration of how these other field actors might change with respect to the rest of the field. For example, theorists have shown that charitable foundations may withdraw their support when protest becomes too controversial, but they do not seem to have considered that cultural understandings of what is controversial may vary. This is a field-level process rather than one specific to any single resource provider or SMO. The social movement sector also excludes much movement activity that occurs outside the bounds of politically-oriented organizations. This has led many to exclude from their analyses organizations engaged in such activities as education, artistic production, and journalism, and to risk prematurely concluding that the SMS is becoming more politically mainstreamed.

4. Implications for the Study of Movements

The organizing principles (or institutional logic) of a field may be the objects of contention for challengers and, as in the social movement field, they may govern the forms that challengers take. Seen in this light, social movements embody both resources and cultural schemas that prescribe such things as who should organize, how they should do it, and for what purposes (Clemens 1997). As I have argued, these resources and schemas are

embedded in the context of a social movement field which contains the social controls that continue to produce and reproduce them. This institutional field framework has important implications for our understanding of social movement emergence, behavior, and outcomes, and for the methodologies that we use to study them.

Meyer and Whittier (1994) have shown that the feminist movement's form (frames, tactics, organizational structure, leadership) left a legacy that dramatically impacted the 1980s peace movement. This "spillover" effect was in part due, they argue, to the presence of what they called a "progressive social movement community" that produced publicly available arts, books and bookstores, musicians, and events that diffused feminist culture from movement to movement. This notion of a social movement community reaches beyond the Contentious Politics paradigm in new and interesting ways and is consistent with the field perspective outlined here. Stores that sell activist-oriented books and music, events that diffuse a set of principles about how to wage an institutional challenge – these are processes of the social movement field. Similarly, during cycles of protest, "initiator" movements inspire spin-off movements that share "master frames" with ideologically similar movements (McAdam 1995; Snow and Benford 1992). These too are trans-movement processes that are not adequately addressed by the concepts of political opportunities or resources. McCarthy and McPhail (1998) have shown how U.S. social movements since the Sixties have been channeled by changes in their legal-regulatory environment, the emergence of a new governance structure, a transformation of policing practices and fellow SMOs, and the diffusion of police structures and practices. These changes were themselves a response to the eruptive protests in the social movement field in the Sixties.

If the social movement is an institution embedded in its own field, we should find that conventional political cleavages between “right” and “left” will recede in importance behind such field-level characteristics as dominant logics, density and diversity of actors, network structure, and position within the field. Surprisingly, social movement theorists have rarely considered relations between rightwing and leftwing movements, except in those instances in which they directly oppose one another as movement and counter-movement (e.g., Mottl 1980; Lo 1982). The field perspective suggests that the fates of SMOs on the Right and Left are linked. Bearman and Everett (1992) find preliminary support for this in their study of all SMOs, both left- and rightwing, that protest in Washington D.C. They conclude that marginal social movement groups routinely distinguish themselves from central groups by choosing different tactics. Of course, what is important here is not whether they were leftwing or rightwing, but whether they were central or peripheral to this population of social movement organizations. Within the social movement field, changes among groups of the Left – e.g., their forms, frames, perceptions of efficacy, identities, tactics, ability to mobilize resources – are connected to changes among groups of the Right (and vice versa).

Institutionalized behavior oftentimes is not rational behavior. As such, social movements frequently act in ways that are loosely connected to local conditions but which correspond to field-level trends. Participants adhere to an institutional logic which tells them that *this* is the right way to wage a challenge and *we* are the right people (or organizations) to do it. Quite apart from considerations about the most effective or efficient means of achieving their goals, SM actors often adopt practices that they perceive to be the most readily available and appropriate from the perspective of their position within the social

movement field. Soule (1997, 1999), for example, has shown that tactical innovations are most likely to diffuse most rapidly among student social movement organizations at peer universities, quite apart from the objective effectiveness of the tactic itself. This need not imply that these actors are always, or even primarily irrational. They often have to make decisions based on limited information (e.g., limited by their position in the field) or with consideration for institutional processes. These institutional processes often generate what Neo-institutional theorists refer to as “myth and ceremony” (Meyer and Rowan 1977) – to be distinguished from the technical functions of an organization or movement – and which, if not skillfully deployed, could brand actors as illegitimate and lead to their failure or death. What appears irrational at the organizational level might well be rational at the field level.

The outcomes of social movements depend in part on the nature of the institutional logics that characterize the SM field and whichever other fields the SMs are trying to influence. Just as the modern large corporation spans many fields while also being embedded in its own field (Fligstein 1990), so too do social movements enter into other fields to challenge their dominant institutions and logics, all the while they remaining anchored in the social movement field. For this reason, they are at once “marginal” challengers bringing novel schemas and resources (or novel combinations thereof) to bear in other fields, and dominant actors drawing on well established models in the social movement field. As movements enter other fields – e.g., Science, politics, religion, education, climate change, healthcare, solid waste recycling, civil rights, international trade, agriculture – they face other logics that may compliment or contradict their own (Friedland and Alford 1991). If movements are to be influential in those fields their members must be cognizant of opportunities for frame alignment and alliance building with those in the target

field and be able to mobilize resources that have value and meaning not only in the social movement field but in the target field as well (Snow et al. 1986; Morrill forthcoming).

This view of social movements as an institutionalized form of contention also suggests a different kind of challenge that most studies of social movements have tended to overlook. Challenges to an institution may be explicit and visible or quietly subversive and, oftentimes, unintended. A labor strike, for instance, is a visible challenge to the routine activities of an employer or industry and demands a response (Tarrow 1998). This is the classic domain of the social movement research agenda. But a strike also signals an identity (worker) and a set of beliefs (workers not treated in a certain way have a right to strike) (Clemens 1996). When workers strike for better wages and working conditions they make an implicit assertion that *this* is the appropriate way to challenge *these* institutions. When the form that they adopt is illegal, illegitimate, or otherwise discredited, its use is itself an institutional challenge. Clemens (1997) has shown, for example, how the organizations of nineteenth women, farmers, and workers were adapted for use in the political field and led to a shift in the logic of that field from one of party politics to one of interest group politics. Tilly (1995) and Tarrow (1998) have made similar arguments about the rise of the social movement in the late eighteenth century when ordinary people adopted and adapted familiar forms of organization and cultural schemas for use in the political field. There is no reason to believe that this “quiet subversion” has not worked similarly in other fields and it should be recognized as a potential (and possibly very common) source of movement influence.

Adopting a field perspective also implies new methodologies to accommodate this new level of analysis (Clemens and Schneiberg 2006). Case studies of single social movements, the most common in social movement research, are likely to overlook field-

level processes. It is difficult to see the contours of a field without examining a wide range of movements simultaneously. Moreover, fields and their constituent actors and institutional logics are historically situated. Just as a particular set of actors and circumstances came to establish what we now accept as the model of an art museum (DiMaggio 1991), so too did a historically specific context establish what we now accept as a social movement (Tilly 1978). Existing theories emphasize the importance of rational actions within social movements, but usually fail to consider that what is defined as rational at one point in time may be viewed as naïve and wrong-headed at another. Rationality itself, Weber ([1921] 1978) has famously argued, is historically situated. Field theories, depending as they do on analyses of institutions and institutionalization, make historical analyses more attractive.

Conclusion

More than forty years of scholarship has sought to answer the question *why do social movements emerge?* At the same time, it has been frightfully quiet on the question *why not something else?* Strain theories were criticized for oversimplifying the relationship between structural strains and the emergence of social movements because, among other reasons, joining a social movement is just one possible response – alongside inaction – to a difficult situation (McAdam 1982). Yet subsequent theories also assumed too much about the connection between resources, political opportunities and social movement emergence. Why should challengers adopt social movement-style organizing over, say, an electoral campaign? Guerrilla warfare? Why target political institutions when educational, religious, or some other institutions might also serve their interests? The theoretical paradigm that has

dominated the field of social movement studies for the past forty years has not only failed to answer these questions but also failed to ask them.

If we accept the dominant theoretical perspective on social movements, then we should be surprised that social movements today look so similar to those of the 1830s. It assumes that rational, strategic movement organizers choose those forms that they believe will most efficiently and effectively move them closer to their goals. Yet, it also casts the social movement as an “extra-institutional” form adopted by institutional “outsiders.” Why would challengers adopt a marginal and often ineffective form when other, possibly more efficient and effective, forms of collective action exist? This question dogs the study of social movements and as yet has no adequate answer.

One voice stands out in this theoretical abyss and it is a prominent voice at that. Charles Tilly (1978, 1995, 2004) has extensively examined the social structural shifts of the late-Eighteenth Century that made possible the emergence of the modern social movement. He has argued that the particular combination of characteristics that we recognize today as the social movement emerged at a unique historical juncture in which shifting power alignments reconfigured relations between and among elites and ordinary people. Taken together, these emerging conditions facilitated a new form of contentious politics that remains generally unchanged two hundred years later. How it has persisted is a question that Tilly has failed to fully explain. His extensive work has taught us much about why the repertoire of contention changed, but little about its subsequent persistence.

For too long students of social movements have accepted that social movements are the predominant form for ordinary people who lack access to political decision-making. Many assume that social movements are the sole beneficiaries of resource mobilization or

political opportunities. This is certainly due in part to the specialization and atomization of the discipline (i.e., separate fields for the study of social movements, democratization, interest groups, terrorism, etc.) which limits the attention of researchers to the proximate causes of their own objects of study. However, this limitation ought to inspire careful consideration of counterfactuals and the empirical study of a broader array of contentious actions, as Contentious Politics theorists and many of their critics now advocate (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Armstrong and Bernstein 2007). With our sights cast more broadly we may then find evidence that political opportunities affect other forms of collective action too. As a state's capacity to repress wanes, all sorts of collective actors, from social movements to guerrilla insurgents to terrorist cells, may recognize and act upon this potential opportunity. A theory of social movement emergence must be able to explain why other forms of collective action do not emerge instead.

Toward that end I have argued here that we should explicitly acknowledge that the social movement is and has long been an institutionalized form of contention. It is not “outside” of existing institutions, although it may be outside of (or marginal to) some institutionalized *fields*. Neither is it enough to say that it is “transgressive,” as it may be a more or less established form of claims-making in different fields. Acknowledging this, we can then draw from an extensive literature on institutions and institutionalization that takes as its focus the persistence of institutions – conceived of here as dual structures of schemas and resources (Sewell 1992) – and begin to theorize the processes that sustain and constrain the social movement form across a remarkably broad array of issues and domains. Like political parties, armies, and labor unions, movements are ideal types that in the real world may blend, converge, and diverge. We should study this variation, and understand why

groups remain within our heuristic boundaries and what makes them occasionally cross them.

This formulation takes seriously the critique of existing social movement theories that they too often adhere to an overly narrow conception of context, almost always the political field (Armstrong and Bernstein 2007; Goodwin and Jasper 1999; Van Dyke et al. 2004). To be sure, states do play an important role in regulating the social environment through rules, laws, and coercion, but as others have demonstrated (e.g., McCammon et al. 2001; Armstrong 2002) so too do institutionalized *non-political* beliefs and behaviors give meaning and form to action.

Theories of fields (e.g., Bourdieu 1988, 1993; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Hannan and Carroll 1992; Levi Martin 2003) offer new ways to think about the contexts within which social movement campaigns unfold. The political field is but one among many into which challengers may enter, each characterized by its own dominant institutional logic (Friedland and Alford 1991), powerful actors, challengers, and governance structures (McAdam and Scott 2005). I have proposed that there exists a social movement field in which challengers are oriented toward a similar set of institutions and relations, generally share an institutional logic, and consequently adopt similar forms of contention. The social movement field concept is similar to but broader than McCarthy and Zald's (1977) social movement sector in that it includes all social movements and social movement organizations, but also government authorities, independent media, countermovements, resource providers, and opponents that contribute to keeping the social movement the most readily available and legitimate form for waging institutional challenges. It also differs from Curtis and Zurcher's (1973) multi-organizational field which is defined by the direct rather

than indirect ties among organizations (network versus field effects). Together these actors reproduce the social movement not because it is so effective but because it is legally sanctioned, normatively approved, and has become the natural, taken-for-granted way of challenging institutions. It is here, in the social movement field, that the social movement is embedded. It is here that we should examine the processes of institutionalization that have sustained this form for so long.

My intention here is not to replace the ideas and theoretical accomplishments of a prolific generation of social movement scholars, but to continue to align and elaborate the conceptual affinity among social movement, cultural, social network, and organizational theories. The theoretical approach described here is young and has yet to make full use of the conceptual tools available to it. It has not, for instance, fully appreciated the illuminating literature on organizational networks and their role in transmitting information, resources, and influence. Too often it has stopped at the level of the organizational field instead of examining the intersection, embeddedness, and nesting of many fields and the eclectic audiences that accompany them. The role of opportunity structures (not just the political variety) in institutional fields has yet to be adequately examined. This perspective has privileged macro-level analyses at the expense of understanding social psychological and micro-structural processes. Fields are often presented in overly simplified ways that collapse a diverse array of challengers and perspectives into one or two. Needless to say, many wrinkles that I have not dealt with here must be ironed out of this new perspective even as we look to it for new theoretical insights. Students of institutions (and organizations and culture) are asking questions that have eluded the social movement research agenda and which I have tried to bring to the fore here. Conversely, social movement scholars know a

great deal about how institutional challengers actively influence the social world. Together these fields of study hold the potential for a more comprehensive theory of institutions and social change.

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