POLITICAL SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON COLLECTIVE ACTION

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In the field of research on collective action and social movements the past twenty years has brought an increasing recognition that political structures create obstacles and opportunities for collective actors. What has developed as the “political process” approach is largely a disunified set of variables and theories thought to be political and important. In many ways this research is the frontier of CA/SM research and suggests a more active dialogue between this field and political sociology. The body of political sociological research surveyed in this paper is not chosen systematically for its usefulness for such a dialogue, but I use it as a jumping off point for exploration and further theory bridging. Very little of the research I review makes collective action the center of analysis, and in fact some only makes vague reference to it (e.g., some discussions of “class conflict”). Nevertheless, my intent here is to draw out of this work some recurring themes about collective action that may then be articulated with CA/SM research.

Frankly, my hope was to develop from the eleven studies reviewed here a parsimonious typology of political sociological perspectives on collective action. That task proved to be too difficult given my time constraints and the broad range of perspectives in this research. Instead I identify six themes that appear across multiple perspectives that at once suggest commonalities and divergence among them. Some themes echo the research of political process theorists and some suggest modifications or new directions for that work.
THEMES ON MOVEMENTS

Movements and Political Parties

CA/SM research defines its subject of study as the organized actions of collectivities excluded from the “legitimate” institutional avenues of political decision-making. Collective actors arise not among elites, capitalists or powerholders, but within civil society among “the masses,” and in contest with the institutionalized ways of doing things. So, for example, political parties are not included in these analyses. However, several of the political sociological approaches treat the boundaries of the institution as permeable for collective actors. Wallerstein (1992), for example, in true World Systems fashion views movements over the course of half-centuries or more and charts them from their adolescent days as outside challengers to maturity at the helms of states, and in some cases back again to the streets. From this perspective movements are not extra-institutional actors that necessarily dissolve when they come to power, but rather they maintain a cultural-ideological integrity and coherence with their past as they change seats. They may even be characterized while in power as challengers to power, as in the example of Gorbchev’s Leninist challenge within the soviet state of in the late 1980s (p. 75). Przeworski (1985) follows this theme in his analysis of social democratic parties as a strategic political vehicle of nineteenth century socialist movements. As both Wallerstein and Przeworski emphasize, capture of the state apparatus was seen as a key goal for movements of that time. Other theorists emphasize ties between movements and parties as important for domestic policy outcomes (Goldfield 1989, Peterson 1993, Moon and Kim 1996).
CA/SM theorists treat political parties as different creatures than social movements, although it may be argued that such a decision is as much a reflection of the level of analysis as anything. As the work of Wallerstein and Przeworski suggests (much more for Wallerstein), movements as long-term political vehicles are apt to adapt to their changing positions in society without necessarily losing altogether the character of their insurgency. Even as they do change, new movements appear in their place to challenge them, suggesting a cycle of protest not discussed by CA/SM analysts.

The Sources of Movements

Political sociologists conceive of movements in one of two ways. One perspective assumes that movements are the result of proletarianization of the workforce, such that workers mobilize when the pressures of advancing industrialism bear down on them. This includes both marxian perspectives that focus on inherent contradictions in the forces of capitalism and modernization approaches that identify stages that societies pass through on their course to democratization. A second perspective sees movements as responses by excluded groups to their denial of the benefits of citizenship. These studies include movements of such groups as workers, racial-ethnic minorities, women, students, farmers and the poor. This reflects a distinction in the CA/SM literature of the so-called New Social Movements (NSMs) from other movements, notably labor movements. NSMs have received more attention from European sociologists than Americans and are thought to be more of a cultural than economic phenomenon, often being called “identity” movements due to their characteristic group identity-based claims. The CA/SM literature explicitly asks whether NSMs are qualitatively different than
economic-based movements, whereas much of the political sociology literature implicitly assumes such a difference.

**Instrumental Outcomes**

The relevance of movements for some political sociologists arises in their studies of policy outcomes. In this regard, political sociology can help to advance CA/SM research by posing a set of questions that the latter has only recently begun to address. One reason for this lack of theoretical attention to movement outcomes is the difficulty of measuring them, a difficult evident in political sociological work.

Two approaches can be identified in this work, one relying on quantitative indicators of movement activity and policy outcomes, the other on qualitative evidence of movements and outcomes. The quantitative approach uses such indicators of movement activity as organizational membership (Goldfield 1989, Korpi 1989) and the number of working days used in industrial conflict divided by the size of the industrial workforce (Korpi 1989). Movements are said to influence the passage of legislation if it the legislation reflects the interests of movements and if there is a corresponding increase in movement activity just prior to passage. Such evidence does not insure a relationship between the two—in fact, movement activity might arise parallel with and as a *result* of pending legislation and have no impact on that legislation whatsoever. Qualitative research tends to take a more holistic and longer-term view of movements in relation to political systems. Barrington Moore’s study (1966) of pathways to three regime types is a good example. His studies of six modernizing states span several centuries and are concerned with the role of class-based movements in the multifarious processes of state
formation. From such a bird’s eye view the outcomes of movements can be discerned from broad social patterns. In Moore’s view, movements are virtually defined by their outcomes. The movements that matter are those that revolutionize the political landscape. Others infer movement effects from cross-national comparative studies. Therborn (1977), for example, finds that states make concessions to movements in order to meet their own goals. So, to successfully mobilize their populations for war, or to attract foreign investment (Kaufman 1979), states extended concessions (e.g., enfranchisement) to opposition movements. For analysts of movements within the political system (e.g., Wallerstein and Przeworski), the effects of movements on policy outcomes are a foregone conclusion.

The Role of Elites

Doug McAdam (1996), in his review of the CA/SM literature on “political opportunity structures” (POS), concludes that research has converged on four common variables of the POS rubric. Two of these assert a role for elites in affecting collective action. Movements face a more receptive POS when elites are divided and when movements have ties to some of them. The political sociological literature offers support for this view in several studies. Both Therborn (1977) and Moon and Kim (1996) identify an important connection between movements and a divided elite. For Therborn, the presence of movements is not sufficient to explain democratic outcomes, but they become an important force when coupled with parts of the ruling class. In the case of post-revolutionary France: “Although the French aristocracy returned after Waterloo to take up its old positions in state and church, it had been decisively broken by the Great
Revolution. Thus, by the middle of the century, the free landed peasantry was strong enough to provide the popular support for Louis Napoleon’s shrewd institutionalization of universal male suffrage” (Therborn 1977, p. ?). In his analysis of the political institutional environment for health care debates in twentieth century U.S., Peterson (1993) sees movement organizations as members of interest group coalitions. He argues that the strength of coalitions for policy reform debates is related to their ties to legislative elites. Goldfield (1989) finds similar evidence in the case of labor groups and New Deal legislation.

The Cooptation of Movements

CA/SM scholars have long recognized the possibility for movements to be coopted by political institutions, but political sociologists extend this theorizing in interesting ways. Robinson (1996) demonstrates that cooptation can come in the form of foreign governmental support. The changing face of the world-peripheral regimes in the mid-eighties, he argues, reflects an emergent strategy in the core (i.e., U.S.) to promote polyarchic regimes using consensual means rather than the earlier strategy of using coercive methods to install and maintain authoritarian regimes. To do so, core states funneled resources to movement groups to promote their growth and influence if they support the interests of the core, or to divide and weaken them if they threaten them.

Korpi (1989) argues for a much more favorable effect of cooptation from a movement’s perspective in which conservatives in political institutions appropriate some movement claims in order to weaken the ability of movements to press through other, more radical claims. This results in a so-called “contagion from the Left” (Duverger
1954, quoted in Korpi 1989, p. 313), in which the entire political-ideological framework shifts leftward. Both of these perspectives on political cooptation of movements suggest new directions for CA/SM research.

*The Destabilization Effect*

There is a functionalist vein that runs through political sociology that is not explicitly acknowledged in the literature. It assumes that political systems tend toward a state of equilibrium, a condition that mass movements frequently threaten. This assumption takes the form of what might be called the “civil unrest” approach to movements. In this view movements are not movements as such, but are characterized as civil unrest that tips the balance of costs and benefits for political decision-makers. State regimes may respond by extending concessions, imposing martial order, or collapsing. Kaufman (1979) argues that labor unrest in developing countries is exacerbated by policy initiatives intended to stimulate foreign investment, and that bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes emerge in response to unilaterally quell civil disorder. In South Korea, student-led protests became “civil unrest” when they swayed the majority middle class—which constituted the strategic base of support for the authoritarian regime—and led to decisive democratic concessions from an authoritarian regime (Moon and Kim 1996). Therborn (1977) emphasizes the state’s desire for domestic stability to strengthen its hand for war. He argues that the U.S. government’s enforcement of voting rights for blacks in the 1960s can be explained by its entry into the war in Vietnam and its “concern with a crumbling home front marked by black rebellion, student movements and opposition to the war” (p. ?).
The weakness of this perspective lies in its inability to explain the varying ability of political systems to absorb this “pressure from below.” The civil unrest perspective also naively reduces the effects of movements to a single dimension: disruptiveness. As others have shown, other dimensions are also important (e.g., divided elite, movement ties to elites, levels of repression, institutional structures).

CONCLUSION

The political sociology perspectives reviewed here all recognize the role of collective action in the political process and in so doing clarify the relevance of political sociologic approaches for studies of collective action and social movements. Political sociologists who study movements and CA/SM sociologists who study political systems overlap each other in some ways and complement each other in others. Both approaches suggest that elites are important for movements in the extent to which they are divided and have ties to movements. Both approaches have also made a distinction between economics-based movements and identity-based movements.

For CA/SM research several suggestions arise for possible directions for future research. The world systems perspective (Wallerstein 1992) brings new meaning to “cycles of protest.” He identifies a process whereby movements are seen as renewed challenges to elder movements that made similar claims, then came to power but did not fulfill the aims of either the new or elder movement. Cycles of protest at the level of the world system invite a refreshing new lens for social movements scholars.

The world systems perspective also is among the political sociological perspectives that could renew a debate all to implicit in the CA/SM literature about
whether political parties and other institutional actors can be usefully considered in the same (or similar) light as extra-institutional actors. Wallerstein (1992) and Przeworski (1985) both make compelling cases that movements make rational decisions to join the polity as a strategic and collective means to achieve their goals. When viewed over long spans of time and in historical perspective, movements may be usefully viewed more broadly than social movements scholars now view them.

For CA/SM research that is increasingly turning toward questions of movement effects, political sociology has much to offer for guidance. Studies of policy outcomes and regime change or collapse may provide models for measurement and method, and a language for theories. The body of research on New Deal era legislation alone can provide a wide range of such benefits (cf. Goldfield 1989, Korpi 1989, Manza 2000).

Research in political sociology also suggest new directions for social movements researchers interested in political institutional cooptation of movements. Cooptation does not just occur within a single political system, but can occur across systems (Robinson 1996)—a recognition that is important for the recent surge of research on transnational social movements and movements in a globalizing context. Cooptation can also be beneficial to movements insofar as their demands are appropriated by institutional actors as a means to diffuse the popular challenge against them (Korpi 1989).
REFERENCES


