The Diffusion of Social Movements

*Actors, Mechanisms, and Political Effects*

It is widely recognized that social movements may spread – or “diffuse” – from one site to another. Such diffusion, however, is a complex and multi-dimensional process that involves different actors, networks, and mechanisms. This complexity has spawned a large body of literature on different aspects of the diffusion process, yet a comprehensive framework remains an elusive target. This book is a response to that need, and its framework focuses on three basic analytical questions. First, what is being diffused? This question directs attention to both the protest repertoires and interpretive frames that actors construct to define issues and mobilize political claims. Second, how does diffusion occur? This book focuses attention on the activist networks and communication channels that facilitate diffusion, including dialogue, rumors, the mass media, the Internet, nongovernmental organizations, and organizational brokers. Finally, what is the impact of diffusion on organizational development and shifts in the scale of contentious politics? This volume suggests that diffusion is not a simple matter of political contagion or imitation; rather, it is a creative and strategic process marked by political learning, adaptation, and innovation.

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The Diffusion of Social Movements

Actors, Mechanisms, and Political Effects

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Students of social movements have long been fascinated by the ways in which they influence or spread from one site to another – in short, how they diffuse. Recent scholarship has shed light on different dimensions of the diffusion process, including the actors, networks, and mechanisms that make diffusion happen. This volume is an attempt to pull together different strands of this research into an integrated and comprehensive understanding of the diffusion process.

Most of the contributors to this volume participated in a conference at Cornell University in November 2007 that explored how social movements create linkages and frame issues under contention. The conference was an initiative of an interdisciplinary theme project, “Contentious Knowledge: Science, Social Science, and Social Protest,” sponsored by Cornell’s Institute for the Social Sciences. This project brought together scholars who study contentious politics with others who explore the social construction (and contestation) of authoritative knowledge. The dialogue among these scholars sparked considerable interest in the diffusion of mobilizing tactics and frames across activist networks. It also revealed the need for a single volume to integrate what we know about the diffusion of social movements and identify some of the new research frontiers on the topic. We hope this volume contributes to these goals.

Our collaboration has greatly benefited from the generous support of the Institute for the Social Sciences (ISS) at Cornell University, which funded a series of seminars and workshops related to this topic and provided an enriching intellectual environment where theme project members could work. ISS Director Elizabeth Mannix and Associate Provost David Harris offered unwavering support for our interdisciplinary research, and Anneliese Truame and Judi Eastburn devoted their considerable organizational and administrative skills (not to mention their patience) to our project. We are indebted to project members Steve Hilgartner, Maria Cook, Durba Ghosh, Janice Thies, Jason Frank, Tom Medvetz, Kyoko Sato, and Susan Spronk for intellectual inspiration, and especially to project leader Ron Herring for his tireless search for
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