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978-1-107-02066-5 - Putting Social Movements in Their Place: Explaining Opposition to Energy Projects in the United States, 2000–2005

Doug McAdam and Hilary Schaffer Boudet

Excerpt

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I

From Copernicus to Ptolemy and (Hopefully) Back Again

From its modest beginnings during the 1970s and early 1980s, the study of social movements has developed into one of the largest subfields in American sociology.¹ In recent years, scholars in a host of other disciplines or fields – including political science (Beissinger 2001; Bunce 1999; Dalton, Van Sickle, and Weldon 2009; della Porta 1995; Dosh 2009; Kitschelt 1995; Koopmans 1993; Kriesi et al. 1995; O'Brien and Li 2006; Tarrow 2005; Wood 2003; Yashar 2005), organizational studies (Davis and McAdam 2000; Davis et al. 2005; Ingram, Yue, and Rao 2010; Lounsbury 2005; Rao, Monin, and Durand 2003; Strang and Soule 1998; Vogus and Davis 2005), education (Binder 2002; Davies and Quirke 2005; Hallett 2010; Rojas 2006, 2007; Slaughter 1997; Stevens 2001), environmental studies (Aldrich 2008; Rootes 2003; Rucht 1999; Sherman 2011; Vasi 2011), and law and society (Edelman, Leachman, and McAdam 2010; Gustafsson and Vinthagen 2011; Kay 2005; McCann 1994; Pedriana 2006) – have turned increasingly to social movement theory in an effort to better understand the dynamics of conflict and change within their respective scholarly domains. But even as we acknowledge and celebrate the vibrancy of the field, we worry about what we see as

¹ We want to be clear from the outset regarding our usage of the term *social movement studies*. We use the term to describe the interdisciplinary and international community of scholars that gradually emerged during the late 1970s and early 1980s around a shared and explicit identification of social movements as the central object of scholarly interest. With this characterization we are not for a minute suggesting that movements had never been studied before this time. We are, however, arguing that movements had never been the defining empirical focus of a specialized field of study, as they were to become with the birth and subsequent growth of social movement studies.

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its increasing narrowness. In his 2009 article in *Annual Review of Sociology*, Andrew Walder voices similar concerns, criticizing what he sees as the field's preoccupation with the dynamics of "mobilization" and general disinterest in a host of broader topics, including the traditional focus among political sociologists on the macrolinks between social structure and various forms of political behavior. There are, however, two other sources of "narrowness" in the field that concern us even more than the one identified by Walder. These are

- The field's preoccupation with movement groups and general neglect of other actors who also shape the broader "episodes of contention" in which movements are typically embedded, and
- The overwhelming tendency of scholars to "select on the dependent variable"; that is to study movements – by which we mean successful instances of mobilization – rather than the much broader populations of "mobilization attempts" or "communities at risk for mobilization" that would seem to mirror the underlying phenomenon of interest more closely.

In combination, these emphases conduce to a starkly Ptolemaic view of social movements. Like Ptolemy, who held that the Earth was at the center of the cosmos, today's movement scholars – at least in the United States – come dangerously close to proffering a view of contention that is broadly analogous to the Ptolemaic system, with movements substituting for the Earth as the center of the political universe. We worry that by locating movement actors at the center of analysis and confining studies to successful instances of mobilization, today's scholars seriously exaggerate the frequency and causal potency of movements while obscuring the role of other actors in political contention.

The research described in this book was motivated by a desire to redress these shortcomings, if you will, to argue for a much more Copernican view of contention, in which emergent grassroots activism – to the extent it develops at all – typically plays only a minor role in episodes of community conflict. You will note that the term *social movement* does not appear in the previous sentence. We weren't so much interested in studying movements per se as the variation in emergent collective action within communities at risk for mobilization. Specifically, we report the results of a comparative case study of the extent to which twenty communities, designated as sites for environmentally risky energy projects, mobilized in opposition to the proposal. Our sample was drawn from all the communities designated for new energy projects for which Final Environmental

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Impact Statements (EISs) were required and completed between 2004 and 2007. The list of all such projects – and designated communities – was drawn from the CSA Illumina Digests of EISs for the years noted in the preceding sentence. We will take up the methodological specifics of the study in Chapter 2.

Using a mix of analytic narrative, traditional fieldwork, and fuzzy set/Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fs/QCA) developed by Charles Ragin (2000), we seek to answer five questions. First, looking at “communities at risk” rather than movements per se, how much emergent collective action do we actually see in our twenty cases? Given the tendency to select actual movements for study, we have very little idea what the underlying baseline of local collective action looks like. In addressing this first question, we hope to shed light on this issue. Second, what “causal conditions” appear to explain variation in the level of mobilization in these communities? Third, net of other factors, what influence, if any, does the level of mobilized opposition have on the outcome of the proposed project? Fourth, we are interested in the dynamics by which localized opposition to a particular kind of energy project – liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals – scaled up to create broader regional movements against the technology. Why did opposition to LNG terminals grow into broader regional movements in some parts of the country, but not others? And why did that opposition never develop into a truly national movement? Finally, reflecting our desire to broaden out the field and draw insights from scholars in related areas of scholarship, we seek to understand how the research reported here can benefit from, while perhaps contributing to, the rich literature on the policy process that has emerged during the past twenty years or so. We devote considerable attention to this last issue in Chapter 6. Before we take up any of these empirical issues, however, we want to begin by situating this work in a critical analysis of the evolution of the field of social movement studies throughout the past thirty to thirty-five years.

“WHAT A LONG, STRANGE TRIP IT’S BEEN”

Even as we criticize the narrow, movement-centric focus of much contemporary scholarship, we can’t help but marvel at the vibrancy of the field and celebrate the fact that social movements are now clearly regarded as an important phenomenon for political analysis. It wasn’t always so. When the first author headed off to college as an undergraduate in 1969, he was expecting to be able to take a course or two on social movements. Having committed to work in Washington, D.C., for a coalition of California

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peace churches as part of broader effort to end the draft, McAdam was hoping to gain a more academic perspective on the history and dynamics of social movements as a form of politics. Logically, from his point of view, he first looked in the course catalog under political science, assuming that was where he would be most likely to find a class on social movements. Nothing. The catalog was filled to overflowing with courses on Congress, international relations, the American electoral system, local public administration, and a host of other institutional features of U.S. politics, but there was nothing whatsoever on social movements or other forms of contentious politics. He remembers briefly surveying the course offerings in the history department, but aside from a course or two on much earlier “contentious moments” in U.S. history – for example, the Civil War and the American Revolution – he found nothing that would give him perspective on more contemporary struggles. Knowing nothing about sociology, he did not even think to look at that section to assay the course offerings in that department. (It would not, however, have mattered if he did. The sociological subfield of social movements was still at least a decade away.)

Mildly disappointed, he filled his schedule with other courses and quickly forgot about his interest in the topic. It wasn’t until the fall quarter of his sophomore year that he was reminded of his abortive search when he unexpectedly encountered the topic of social movements in a very surprising course context. Having signed up to take a class in abnormal psychology, McAdam was stunned to see that nearly one-quarter of the course was to be devoted to the topic of – you guessed it – social movements. Having always seen himself as reasonably well adjusted, he was surprised, throughout the quarter, to learn that movement participation was viewed not as a form of rational political behavior but as a reflection of aberrant personality types and irrational forms of “crowd behavior.” Who knew?!

In point of fact, McAdam had stumbled upon one of the few corners of the academy that devoted any kind of attention to the study of social movements. But as discordant as the perspective was with his lived experience of activism, the psychological view captured the prevailing view of the phenomenon and fit seamlessly with the broader theories of society and politics that were dominant in American social science at the time.

Structural Functionalism, Pluralist Theory, and Collective Behavior

The social sciences in the United States were characterized by a marked theoretical consensus in the quarter century following World War II. The

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study of social movements, it should be clear, was a minor academic backwater in sociology and psychology. There were no social movement scholars per se; instead movements were seen as but a minor topic embedded within the broader fields of collective behavior and abnormal psychology in sociology and psychology, respectively. What is interesting, however, is how well the general psychological view of movements reflected the dominant understandings of social and political life characteristic of American social science during the postwar period.

1. Structural Functionalism

The dominant perspective on modern society in this period was structural functionalism. Its leading proponent may have been Talcott Parsons (1951, 1971), but there were few dissenting voices in the consensual choir of postwar American sociology. Whether in Parsons highly elaborated – some might say borderline incomprehensible – version or any of the more accessible variants spelled out in the leading textbooks of the day, structural functionalism offered a view of society as orderly, purposive, harmonious, and, for the most part, free of strain and conflict. Societies – at least functional ones like the United States – were analogous to machines. They were comprised of a complex system of interdependent institutional “parts” – for example, economy, family, education, and politics – that worked together to ensure an overall functional social order. Families socialized children into a broadly consensual normative order; schools reinforced that order and provided the skills and knowledge required to command jobs in the economy, and so on. In this sense, societies, like all machines, tended toward a functioning equilibrium. By implication, serious conflict and change were rare in society, akin to a machine malfunction or breakdown. But again, these were seen as exceedingly infrequent events, bracketing long periods of sustained order and social harmony.

2. Pluralism

Like the functionalist account of society, the dominant model of power and politics during this period – pluralism – also stressed order and consensus over change and conflict as the hallmarks of the American political system. The central tenet of the pluralist model was that political power was widely distributed among a host of competing interests rather than concentrated in the hands of any particular group or segment of society. Thus Dahl (1967: 188–9), perhaps the leading proponent of the theory, tells us that, in the United States, “political power is pluralistic in the sense that there exist many different sets of leaders; each set has somewhat different objectives

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from the others, and each has access to its own political resources, each is relatively independent of the others. There does not exist a single set of all-powerful leaders who are wholly agreed on their major goals and who have enough power to achieve their major goals.”

This wide distribution of power serves to tame the political system. The absence of concentrated power is held to ensure the openness and responsiveness of the system and to inhibit the use of force or violence in dealing with political opponents. With regard to the openness of the system, Dahl (1967: 23) writes that “whenever a group of people believe that they are adversely affected by national policies or are about to be, they . . . have extensive opportunities for presenting their case and for negotiations that may produce a more acceptable alternative. In some cases, they may have enough power to delay, to obstruct, and even to veto the attempt to impose policies on them.” The implication is clear: groups may vary in the amount of power they wield, but no group exercises sufficient power to bar others from participation in the political system.

Once inside the system, groups find that other organized interests are at least minimally attentive to their political preferences. This responsiveness is again a product of the wide distribution of power held to be characteristic of the pluralist system. Groups simply lack the power to achieve their political goals without the help of other contenders. Instead they must be constantly attuned to the goals and interests of other groups if they are to forge the coalitions that are the key to success in such a system.

Effective political action also requires that groups exercise a degree of tactical restraint in their dealings with other interests. Any attempt to exercise coercive power over other groups is seen as a serious tactical mistake. Lacking sufficient power, contenders are dependent on one another for the realization of their goals. Thus according to proponents of the model, the exercise of force is tantamount to political suicide. Parity in power, then, insures not only the openness and responsiveness of the system but its restrained character as well. “Because one center of power is set against another, power itself will be tamed, civilized, controlled and limited to decent human purposes, while coercion. . . will be reduced to a minimum” (Dahl 1967: 24). In place of force and violence, the system will “generate politicians who learn how to deal gently with opponents, who struggle endlessly in building and holding coalitions together . . . who seek compromises” (Dahl 1967: 329).

Although internally consistent and very much in keeping with the overarching functionalist perspective on society, the pluralist model made social movements a real puzzle. If the U.S. political system possessed the

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normatively appealing characteristics that pluralists ascribed to it – openness, responsiveness, and tactical restraint – how then were we to explain the puzzling phenomenon of social movements? Why would any group engaged in rational, self-interested political action eschew the advantages of such an open, responsive, restrained political system? One possible answer to the question would be that the group in question has simply made a tactical mistake. Yet the regularity with which social movements emerge makes it difficult to believe that, as a historical phenomenon, they represent little more than a consistent strategic error made by countless groups. There is, however, another answer, fully consistent with the underlying assumptions of pluralism. Movement participants are simply not engaged in “rational, self-interested political action.” Accordingly, their rejection of the functional “proper channels” of U.S. politics is not seen as evidence of tactical miscalculation so much as proof that we are dealing with an altogether different form of collective behavior. The logic is straightforward. Social movements represent an entirely different form of behavior from routine politics. The pluralist model, with its emphasis on compromise in pursuit of rational self-interest provides a parsimonious explanation for the latter. Social movements are better left, in Gamson’s wonderful phrasing, to the psychologist or “social psychologists whose intellectual tools prepare them to better understand the irrational” (Gamson 1990: 133).

We want to make it clear that this stress on the irrationality of movements was not a component of the pluralist perspective. We are not aware of any explicit theoretical discussion of social movements by the main proponents of pluralism. Their silence on the topic owes not to any disdain for the irrationalism of movements but simply to a shared sense that, within a pluralist system like the United States, movements were typically unnecessary and generally ineffective. It was those working in the collective behavior tradition who embraced and articulated a conception of movements as apolitical and as generally reflecting psychological rather than instrumental political dynamics.

3. Collective Behavior (and a few brave dissenters)

As we have tried to indicate, there was no defined field of social movement studies until at least the mid- to late 1970s. There were, however, a handful of brave souls who defied the functionalist/pluralist consensus during the postwar period to make the study of social conflict and change the focus of their work. Most of these scholars were either Europeans – such as Eric Hobsbawm (1959, 1962), E.P. Thompson (1963, and George Rudé

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(1959, 1964) – or American social scientists working in Europe. The latter included Sid Tarrow (1967) and, most importantly, Charles Tilly and a host of colleagues (Rule and Tilly 1972; Shorter and Tilly 1974; Snyder and Tilly 1972; Tilly 1964, 1969; Tilly, Tilly, and Tilly 1975). By contrast, the number of scholars who dared to suggest that conflict and change was also ubiquitous in the United States was exceedingly small. C. Wright Mills (1959) stood virtually alone in this regard during the 1950s but would be joined by others – for example, Gamson (1968a, 1968b) and Domhoff (1970) – as the period wore on.

Although only a few of these scholars were Marxists, virtually all of them were engaged in Marxist-inspired work. As such, they were not interested in social movements per se, but rather in the class basis of social conflict, collective action, and social change. The point is their work did not constitute an embryonic field of social movement studies. There was, however, one small group of American social scientists who did see themselves as studying social movements, though only as one specific instance of a more general social form known as *collective behavior*.

More specifically, the term collective behavior referred to a discrete collection of social forms that were held to be unusual and represent ineffectual, even irrational, responses to the breakdown of social order. These forms included crazes, panics, fads, crowd behavior, and social movements and revolutions. Lumping movements and revolutions together with the other behavioral forms in the list betrays the prevailing apolitical view of the phenomena. At a macrolevel, we were told that movements and revolutions did not so much reflect rational challenges to entrenched political and economic authority as they did dysfunctional responses to the breakdown of social order. In this sense, the perspective bears the stark imprint of the broader structural functionalist theory discussed in the preceding text. Movements – and all forms of collective behavior – were held to arise on those rare occasions when rapid social change (e.g., industrialization, urbanization, and war) occasioned a generalized breakdown in social norms and relationships (Lang and Lang 1961; Smelser 1962; Turner and Killian 1957).

Writing at the time, Gusfield captures the essence of the argument and the close connection between the functionalist view of society and the collective behavior perspective. States Gusfield (1970: 9), “we describe social movements and collective action as responses to social change. To see them in this light emphasizes the disruptive and disturbing quality which new ideas, technologies, procedures, group migration, and intrusions can have for people.” The imagery should, by now, be familiar:

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society is normally stable, orderly, and self-reproducing. Moreover, people benefit from this order as much as the institutions that comprise society. When the comforting normative order is shattered by the kind of “disturbing” changes to which Gusfield alludes, individuals can be expected to react. Rapid social change is stressful because it undermines the normative routines to which people have grown accustomed. Subjectively, this disruption is experienced as “normative ambiguity,” which we are told “excites feelings of anxiety, fantasy, hostility, etc.” (Smelser 1962: 111). It is these feelings that motivate all forms of collective behavior including the social movement.

Movements emerge in this view as groping, if ineffective, collective efforts to restore social order and the sense of normative certainty undermined by rapid change. As such, they owe more to psychological rather than political or material motivations. This is not to say that movements are unrelated to politics. Smelser explicitly tells us that movements frequently serve to alert policy makers to significant “strains” in society to which they may need to attend. It is significant, however, that the instrumental political dimension of the movement is reserved for policy makers rather than the movement actors. For the latter, participation is seen as little more than a form of collective coping behavior, motivated by a desire to overcome the stress and uncertainty produced by the breakdown of normative order. The underlying psychological, quasitherapeutic basis of movement participation is implicitly acknowledged by Smelser in his discussion of the “generalized beliefs” that underlie collective behavior. He writes,

collective behavior is guided by various kinds of beliefs. . . . These beliefs differ, however, from those which guide many other types of behavior. They involve a belief in the existence of extraordinary forces – threats, conspiracies, and so forth. – which are at work in the universe. They also involve an assessment of the extraordinary consequences which will follow if the collective attempt to reconstitute social action is successful. The beliefs on which collective behavior is based (we shall call them *generalized beliefs*) are thus akin to magical beliefs. (Smelser 1962: 8; emphasis in original)

Movement participation is thus motivated by a set of unrealistic beliefs that together function as a reassuring myth of the movement’s power to address the stressful state of affairs confronting adherents. Movement participants, we are told, “endow themselves . . . with enormous power. . . . Because of this exaggerated potency, adherents often see unlimited bliss in the future if only the reforms are adopted. For if they are adopted, they argue, the basis for threat, frustration, and discomfort will disappear”

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(Smelser 1962: 117). The message is clear: if the generalized beliefs that motivate participation represent a wildly inaccurate assessment of the realities confronting the movement, it is only because they function on a psychological rather than a political level. And so it is for the movement as a whole; they may serve as an early warning to rational political actors that something is amiss in the body social, but burdened by fanciful beliefs, the movement isn't to be taken seriously as a political force in its own right.

Before we close this section, it is important that we place the work of collective behavior theorists in historical context. As reactionary as the collective behavior view of movements would seem to be, it would be wrong to read political conservatism into the perspective. On the contrary, most of the leading proponents of the approach ascribed to political values broadly akin to those of the younger generation of scholars who were to birth the field of social movement studies. Both groups were broadly liberal in their political views; it's just that they were focused on very different types of movements. For the younger scholars, the touchstone struggles, as we will see, were the popular progressive movements of the New Left/New Social Movements with which they strongly identified. The situation was very much the reverse for those who edged toward abnormal psychology in their efforts to understand movements. As Gamson wrote in 1975, "part of the appeal of the collective behavior paradigm is its serviceability as an intellectual weapon to discredit mass movements of which one is critical" (1990 [1975]: 133). For the liberal proponents of collective behavior theory, the modal movements to be explained were such repellant political phenomena as Nazism in Germany, Italian fascism, Soviet-style communism, and McCarthyism in the United States. To again quote Gamson, "who could quarrel with an explanation that depicted the followers of a Hitler or Mussolini as irrational victims of a sick society?" (1990 [1975]: 133).

In short, as in all fields of knowledge, political values and contemporary social concerns shaped the scholarship of the collective behaviors theorists and the newer generation of scholars who rejected the perspective in favor of a more explicitly rational political view of movements. More importantly, these concerns and values introduced opposite biases into the study of social movements. If political antipathy to the movements they studied prompted the proponents of collective behavior to stress the irrationality and general ineffectiveness of movements, the strong political identification of the newer generation with their touchstone movements (e.g., civil rights, women's liberation, and peace), encouraged opposite tendencies. The evolution of the field, we will argue in what follows, betrays the biases inherent in this strong, positive identification.