Review Essay
Where are the Social Movements Societies?


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In 1998, David Meyer and Sidney Tarrow proposed that forms of collective action that were popular in rich democracies in the 1960s had become institutionalized (Meyer and Tarrow, 1998). Specifically, they held that demonstrations were more frequent and employed by a broader range of actors and organizations, to some extent because mobilization became easier in an era of inexpensive electronic communication. Protests were also less violent because movements had become professionalized while states had become more adept at regulating and controlling demonstrators. Meyer and Tarrow called countries in which protests assumed these characteristics “social movement societies.”

Evidence supporting the claims of Meyer and Tarrow is mixed (and nicely summarized by Suzanne Staggenborg in Ramos and Rodgers, 2015: 156-9). For example:

- Soule and Earle (2005) analyzed data on about 19,000 protest events in the United States between 1960 and 1986. They found that, over time, the mean size of protest events and the number of distinct protest claims grew, while violent forms of protest policing became less frequent. Yet they also discovered that the frequency of protests declined, fewer organizations were present at each protest event, fewer new groups initiated events, and protesters made fewer new claims.

- Caren, Ghoshal, and Riba (2011) aggregated data from 20 American surveys conducted between 1973 and 2008 (n = about 34,000). They discovered that the number of American adults reporting ever attending a demonstration increased by 15 percentage points during this period. Yet they also found that most of the increase was due to a generational effect. American baby boomers were relatively strongly inclined to take part in demonstrations but other age cohorts were not. Diffusion of protest activities throughout American society was not evident from their data.

- Examining the percentage of respondents in the World Values Survey who claim to have ever participated in a demonstration, and restricting ourselves to the eight rich democracies that have been included in the survey three or more times between its first wave in 1981-84 and its sixth wave in 2010-14 (n = about 43,000), yields Table 1. For four countries (Australia, Canada, Spain, and Sweden) we observe a small average increase of about 5 percentage points in the number of demonstrators. For two countries (New Zealand and the United States) we observe virtually no trend. For two other countries (Japan and South Korea) we observe a small average decrease of about 4 percentage points. Again, the evidence in support of the social movements society thesis is weak.
In their new volume, Howard Ramos and Kathleen Rodgers note some of the mixed evidence in passing but still think that Meyer and Tarrow are on to something. The subtitle of their new volume holds out the promise of social movement societies, and their “Introduction” mentions the Arab Spring, Greek and Spanish anti-austerity protests, the Occupy Movement, Quebec’s Maple Spring, and Idle No More as illustrations of “the spread of contention and politics by [non-electoral] means around the world,” with diffusion of movements and repertoires of action aided by the Internet and social media (Ramos and Rodgers, 2015: 3, 13). One might question whether Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen and, for that matter, Greece, qualify as rich democracies and whether the Internet and social media have the powerful mobilizing effects that are often claimed on their behalf (Brym et al., 2014; Gunitsky, 2015). But these are side issues. Ramos’s and Rodgers’s main goal is to refine the social movement society thesis by examining the Canadian case in detail. To that end, they have assembled a collection of papers by some of the leading students of social movements in Canada and a couple of prominent American figures.

In their “Introduction,” Ramos and Rodgers identify three threads of argument that are neglected by the social movements society thesis and developed in their edited collection: (1) Widespread mobilization took place before the 1960s. (2) Social movements are not segregated from conventional politics. (3) Social movement societies are pluralistic in the sense that they spring from various regional and ethnic bases.

These arguments are not revelations. Students of social movements know, for example, that, before 1960, the biggest and most enduring Canadian social movement of all – the labour movement – was instrumental in forming the CCF and in winning the right to unionize, among other feats. They just as surely know that state-centred theory, introduced by Theda Skocpol and others more than three decades ago, emphasizes how social movements affect conventional politics and vice-versa (Skocpol, 1979; Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol, 1985). Finally, the regional and ethnic bases of many Canadian social movements are pretty much the first things one learns about social movements in this country.

Nonetheless, many of the papers in this collection contribute usefully to the field. Three examples will suffice to make the case.

### Table 1

Percentage of respondents who claim to have participated in a demonstration over time, World Value Survey (for eight rich democracies with three or more data points)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>WVS Waves</th>
<th>Regression equation</th>
<th>Slope</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1,3,5,6</td>
<td>$y = 12.25 + 1.91x$</td>
<td>Weakly positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>2,4,5</td>
<td>$y = 16.7 + 2.75x$</td>
<td>Weakly positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>1,2,3,4,5,6</td>
<td>$y = 13.47 - 0.64x$</td>
<td>Weakly negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>3,5,6</td>
<td>$y = 18.33 + 0.1x$</td>
<td>Nearly flat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>1,2,3,4,5,6</td>
<td>$y = 14.61 - 1.12x$</td>
<td>Weakly negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>2,3,4,5,6</td>
<td>$y = 20.84 + 1.60x$</td>
<td>Weakly positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>1,3,4,5,6</td>
<td>$y = 22.78 + 1.28x$</td>
<td>Weakly positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>1,3,4,5,6</td>
<td>$y = 15.33 + 0.15x$</td>
<td>Nearly flat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Calculated from Nevitte (2015); World Values Survey (2015a; 2015b).
Dominique Masson’s analysis of the Quebec women’s movement shows clearly and in detail “how normalized and routinized relationships between movements and states [can] develop and become entrenched” without movements losing their principled edge or relying on “heroic masculinities in the public sphere” (in Ramos and Rodgers, 2015: 95, 81). Masson might have better contextualized the institutionalization of feminist principles in Quebec by considering how the province’s political-economy contributes to its unique leftism in North America, and how Quebec differs in this respect from other North American substates (Haddow, 2015). Still, her paper is an impressive case study of the movements/state interface.

Another high point in this collection is Lesley Wood’s paper, which bears witness to the militarization of protest policing that has developed alongside the normalization and pacification of protest politics over the past two decades. Negotiated management is the preferred policing strategy for the great majority of North American protests, as proponents of the social movements society thesis suggest. However, Wood’s analysis of the global justice movement shows that protesters who remain unwilling to cooperate with state authorities are increasingly subjected to electronic and human intelligence gathering, pre-emptive arrests, pepper spray, tear gas, Tasers, barricades limiting mobility, and so on. Moreover, the use of militarized repression against crowds that include both manageable and unmanageable protesters appears to radicalize the former, “not dividing and conquering different types of protesters but rather building solidarity between [them], increasing the militancy of the movement” (in Ramos and Rodgers, 2015: 150).

Analysts are entitled to restrict or expand the scope of their generalizations however they wish, but William Carroll shows that by focusing exclusively on social movements in rich, democratic countries, proponents of the social movements society thesis bias their findings toward finding a moderation of discontent over time. In contrast, Carroll’s unique network analysis of counter-hegemonic global social movement organizations such as Amnesty International and the Third World Forum takes up the important theme that professionalization of social movement intellectuals does not necessarily result in cooptation. One is reminded that Lenin (1902) introduced the term “professional revolutionary” 96 years before the advent of the social movements society thesis and that the Second (Socialist) and Third (Communist) Internationals were large bureaucratic organizations that brought scores of left-wing movements and parties together in dozens of World Congresses, Enlarged Plenums, and other meetings between 1889 and 1943, allowing them to publish widely, hold countless rallies, initiate International Workers’ Day (1 May), International Women’s Day (8 March) and the eight-hour workday, and have their anthem, “The Internationale,” translated into more than 40 languages, from Albanian to Zulu (and all this internationalism before television, let alone the Internet and social media).

Other convincing criticisms of the social movements society thesis abound in this volume. For instance, Suzanne Staggenborg (in Ramos and Rodgers, 2015: 155-72) decries the assumption that social movements have become pervasive in all rich democracies and calls for an examination of the sources of variation in the strength of social movements over time and place (although by examining two cases of vibrant movements, she stops short of analyzing such variation). David Tindall’s and Joanna Robinson’s survey of more than 1,200 members of Canadian environmental organizations shows that most members are not very active, providing additional grounds for questioning whether claims about the pervasiveness of activism today are exaggerated (in Ramos and Rodgers, 2015: 208-30). In
his examination of two Canadian environmental campaigns, Mark Stoddart argues that an exclusive focus on the policy effects of social movements deflects attention from their important cultural effects and from everyday activism (in Ramos and Rodgers, 2015: 255; cf. Corrigal-Brown, 2012).

Despite these and other assaults mounted in Protest and Politics, it is possible to maintain, as Ramos and Rodgers do in the subtitle of their book, that the social movements society thesis continues to hold out promise. It is still possible to insist without qualification that contentious politics is on the rise (Ramos and Rodgers, 2015: 307). However, my reading of the articles in this very good collection leads me to a different conclusion: The social movements society thesis misses much of what is important about the complex trajectories of social movements today.

Sources Cited


Skocpol, Theda. 1979. States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China. New York: Cambridge University Press.

