Conclusion

Simplicity vs. Complexity in the Analysis of Social Movements

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In the sciences, it is always the goal, in words usually attributed to Albert Einstein, to make things “as simple as possible, but no simpler.” The question posed by the essays in this volume is whether, when studying social movements and revolutions, treating the state as a unitary actor is making things too simple.

Of course, the notion of the state as a unitary actor has long been debated in political science. In their now classic analysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Allison and Zelikow (1999) argued that seeing the state as a unitary actor facing other similar states in the international arena – the core of realism theory – was only one way to approach the state. Other perspectives included seeing the state as a complex organization with actors within the state constrained and guided by its institutional structure, and as a set of distinct political elites feuding and cooperating to generate permissible decisions.

In the study of social movements, a great deal of progress was made by the simplification of social movement dynamics to the dyadic relations between a unitary movement that sought to change state policy, and a unitary state seeking to resist changes coming from any source “outside” the institutional political system of elections, legislatures, officials and courts. In this “polity” model, put forward by Charles Tilly (1978) and adopted by distinguished scholars such as William Gamson (1975), social movements’ success could be judged in terms of two levels of accomplishment: First, achieving the desired changes in policy; and second, gaining admittance to the polity, by having its agenda and supporting personnel accepted in the institutional system of elections, legislative and executive officials, and courts. While the second type of accomplishment did not immediately achieve the movement’s policy goals, it was considered an important step as state policy was expected not to be so resistant to changes sought from inside the political system.

Tilly’s original graphic presentation of the Polity model is shown in Figure C1. As can be seen, the “ruler and government” is a single actor, in coalition with other actors who are polity members. There is then a boundary around
these groups, marking the difference between polity members (incumbents) and “challengers” who are outside that boundary. Coalitions may cross the boundaries among actors in various ways, but it is “the state” (ruler and government) as such that enters into coalitions with other groups; and the state is never in coalition with challengers.

**Figure C1  Tilly’s Polity Model, Static Version**

Source: Tilly 2000, 5

A great deal of excellent research on social movements was done using this theoretical framework, and it continues to be useful. I have used it myself, as in the study of state-movement dynamics of repression and concessions (Goldstone and Tilly, 2001). Moreover, the view of social movements as unitary actors has already been corrected and greatly enriched by the idea of separating multiple social movement organizations (SMOs) within a movement (Zald and Ash, 1966; Zald and McCarthy, 1997). The Political Opportunity Structure approach to movements (McAdam, 1982; McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, 1996; Tarrow, 2011; Goodwin and Jasper, 1999) has also pointed to elite divisions as a crucial opportunity factor for movement
success, introducing the feuding among political elites as a factor affecting state responses to challenges.

Recently, Fligstein and McAdam (2012) have added complexity to the study of social movements with their work on strategic action fields (see also Goldstone, 2004, and Goldstone and Useem, 2012, for additional approaches to social movements as elements in social action fields). Fligstein and McAdam separate the state into multiple policy fields, led by a multiplicity of “internal governance units,” supported by a variety of “incumbents” and reshaped by the actions of numerous “challengers.” Yet their terminology reveals their debt to the challenger/incumbent dualism of the older Polity model. It is not easily possible in Fligstein and McAdam’s theoretical framework for actors to be simultaneously governance units, incumbents, and challengers within a single strategic action field. Yet that is exactly what we find throughout the essays in this book.

The fresh research in this volume produced by its distinguished contributors makes two novel points. First, there are no clear lines separating the roles of challenger (protestors or social movement activists), incumbents (those engaged in routine acceptance and membership in the polity defined by a policy field), and governance units (agents or institutions of the state). Second, the actors and structures within what we conventionally call governance units or state institutions or official positions are themselves a complex and constantly contested set, with some such actors sometimes indeed defending the policies of the governance unit, but at other times they or other state actors are found allying with certain specific incumbents against those policies, and at still other times they or other state actors are joining challengers to reshape the entire field.

Brian Doherty and Graeme Hayes skilfully point out the highly ambiguous yet critical role of courts within the state/social movement field. Courts are the arenas in which decisions are made whether to treat protestors as criminal or innocent, and hence whether their actions are justifiable. In meting out punishment, it is the courts who play a critical role in the repression (or concessions) to protestors, as the police act mainly to forestall or halt protest action and arrest protestors. Unless the police themselves choose to inflict punishment (and that does often happen, especially in repressive authoritarian regimes), it is the courts that decide whether and to what degree punishments are meted out to those acting outside of institutional channels to challenge prevailing policies.

Yet the court’s role is ambiguous precisely because courts – especially in Anglo-American jurisprudence – are a composite. The state prosecutor is clearly the agent of the state, seeking to have the court enforce the state’s
view of justice and what should be done. The judge is no less an agent and representative of the state, but the judge’s job is to act as impartial mediator in the arena. Then another state agent – the state appointed defense attorney, if the protestors do not obtain private counsel – is designated to act on behalf of the protestors and argue their case. And finally, yet another group, temporarily appointed by the state and granted the power to ascertain guilt or innocence, is explicitly chosen to represent what Tilly or McAdam and Fligstein would call the incumbents – members of society at large. That, of course, is the jury. We thus have career state agents on the side of the regime, on the side of the protestors (defendants), and mandated to be neutral, along with temporary state agents designed to represent neither the state nor the protestors but the broader society – all this within one unit of a unit of governance!

It should not be surprising that given this composite structure, courts have played a variety of roles, from conservative to radical, in history. From the earliest days of English courts, they were an arena (usually the sole arena) in which ordinary Englishmen could challenge the actions of lords (the King’s courts being able to adjudicate such cases without control of the local landowner). In the years leading up to the French Revolution, Parisian courts undermined the authority of the Crown, as a series of sensational cases put the spotlight on the abuse of political power through private scandals, the most notorious being the “Diamond Necklace affair.” The lawyers’ briefs in these cases – published in print runs of tens of thousands in the 1770s and 1780s – were critical in shifting public perceptions of the Crown (Maza, 1993). In America, at various times, the courts were critical in enforcing the Jim Crow regime and in overturning it. At times, it has seemed that the greatest radical force in America has not been street protestors, but the US Supreme Court, as when it ruled racial segregation illegal, created a right of privacy that made first-trimester abortions legal, and now is moving steadily toward expanding the coverage of equal protection to people regardless of their chosen gender role. And the courts can be radical in other places and traditions as well: lawyers and courts played a major role in opposing the Pakistani ruler Pervez Musharraf, and were critical to overturning the manipulated election of Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine in 2004, thus empowering the Orange Revolution.

Still, it is more often the case in authoritarian regimes that courts are much less ambiguous in their role. Rather than being composite and multi-sided, prosecutors, judges, and even defense attorneys collaborate to achieve convictions ordered by the regime, which treats the courts as simply putting a stamp of authority on the regime’s desires and views. To
raise a theme I shall return to several times in this essay, the field faced by social movements is very different in an authoritarian than in a democratic regime. In the former, the courts are usually – unless they defect and start to play a role in fomenting revolution – wholly agents of the state and act to support its interests. In democracies and some semi-democratic regimes, the courts have their own traditions and standards, and seek to act in ways that constrain state authority and often will support challenges to that authority.

Another ambiguous arena, as Katherine Krimmel demonstrates, is the legislature, due to the conflicts among political parties that occur there. The precise constellation of parties and legislative rules also shapes the field faced by social movements. And parties themselves, as I have shown elsewhere (Goldstone, 2003), have deep and multifold links to social movements: they may have begun as social movements that became institutionalized; they may be engaged in deep partnerships with social movements that provide votes and financial support for their candidates; they may either adopt or oppose the goals of specific social movements in order to gain votes or weaken their opponents; and the same actors may appear as social movement leaders, political party leaders and elected legislators and officials.

The relation of parties to movements can shift dramatically over time: in the nineteenth century it was the Republicans who championed black rights and Democrats (especially Southern Democrats) who campaigned for Jim Crow; but by the late twentieth century these party roles and relationships had changed diametrically, so that it was the Democratic Party under President Lyndon Johnson that fought to make full civil rights for blacks the law of the land, while the Republican Party became the dominant party among Southern conservatives. Today it is the Tea Party movement – a movement of incumbents rather than challengers, dominated by the prosperous older white middle class – that has among the closest links to any political party, backing those Republicans who promise to lower their taxes and stop perceived threats from immigration and excessive state spending (Skocpol and Williamson, 2013; Van Dyke and Meyer, 2014).

Yet Krimmel points out that not only the party platforms matter, but the configurations of power in the legislatures as well. Where an open, multi-party structure prevails, as in many European parliaments, new parties based on social movements can easily gain entry to the legislature as parties, as with the Green parties or even the Pirate parties (favoring open information access) that have sprung up across the continent. In countries with a two-party structure, it is much harder for movements to enter politics without gaining allies in one of the major parties – although as a two-party system starts to breakdown, as in Britain, smaller parties
can make themselves felt as well. Moreover, when a party system becomes so polarized and deadlocked that very little can be done, as in the United States at present, it becomes much harder for social movements to benefit from having allies in the major parties, and much harder for them to achieve any policy goals, as all sides seem bent on frustrating the aims of everyone seeking action.

Hélène Combes underlines for us the close relationship between parties and social movements by looking at Latin America, where this relationship has often been symbiotic. Moreover, Combes shows how very personal the relationship between movement and party can be, highlighting two individuals – Evo Morales in Bolivia and Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in Brazil – who rose from being the leaders of social movements to the presidents of their country – quite a transition from challenger to head of the ultimate governance unit. Yet they essentially pursued the same policies throughout their careers.

Again, the context in which such a distinction does make sense is in one-party authoritarian regimes. In that context, the party and regime are often a single integrated organization, which seeks to squelch civil society and limit the influence of any independent social movements. Even in Latin America, Mexico under the years of domination by the PRI Party or Argentina under Perón are good examples of regimes that sought to incorporate all major organized social groups within the party and treated any social movement from outside the party as a hostile challenge.

The chapters by Imrat Verhoeven and Christian Bröer and by Donatella della Porta and Kıvanç Atak also show how actors that we think of as “state actors” can be incumbent or even challenging actors as well. Verhoeven and Bröer look at policy conflicts between municipal and national government in the Netherlands. This is a fairly common situation in multi-level and federal systems. In the United States, for example, federal policy on marijuana and gay marriage is being openly challenged by state and local governments who have legalized both. In these cases is it non-federal but clearly state actors (lower-level governance units) who are challenging the policies of peer and higher-level governance units.

This is not a matter of revolution or radical or unusual circumstances. Rather, it happens quite frequently that various governance units in the same system differ on policies and challenge each other either through contrary legislation or through the courts. When we have various governance units in conflict, and that conflict is mediated by the courts, but the courts are trying to mediate between the letter of the law and popular sentiment as expressed through media and the actions of social movements, we have a
complex field of action indeed! When gay rights activists succeed in placing a referendum to approve gay marriage on the ballot, which is defeated (as in California), it appears that “challengers” have been turned back by “incumbents.” But what if the courts then reverse that outcome by saying that gays have a legal right to marry that is based on the state constitution, and state legislators act to affirm that right? Have the “governance units” then become the “challengers” who are acting against the “incumbents”?

A similar tale can be told of policing, again with the caveat that the role and options of police create very different fields in authoritarian and democratic regimes. della Porta and Atak show very clearly that the institutional constraints and behavior of police are very different in authoritarian and democratic societies (I have argued this as well; Goldstone, 2012). In authoritarian societies, the police treat social protestors as enemies of the state to be stopped at all costs. They will use lethal force, follow up arrests with imprisonment and often torture to break the will of protestors, and impose long jail terms on the leaders of protests. In democratic societies, by contrast, police treat protestors (if peaceful) as exercising legal rights. They may try contain the protests to permitted spaces, but if things get out of hand they will use non-lethal force (mainly tear gas, in extreme cases water cannon and rubber bullets). More important, most of those arrested will be released, and the leaders are likely to be called to bargain over group demands rather than shut away for long terms in prison. Police thus play very different roles vs. social movements, as enabling vs. disabling, in democracies vs. dictatorships. Indeed, as Joseph Luders (2010) has shown by contrasting the conduct of various local authorities during the Civil Rights Movement, when the police exceeded the bounds of expected reasonable response to protests, their actions delegitimized the state government and policies they were trying to protect, and helped catalyze national support for the Civil Rights Movement. In areas where police were far more restrained, their actions generated no national outcry and produced more moderate outcomes.

If police can be variable in how they shape the arena of protest and how their interactions with protestors shape outcomes, this is even more true for armies and militia. Ian Roxborough shows very clearly that when viewing the assemblage of army, police, constabulary and militias engaged in responding to social protests, we must “abandon ... any notion that we are dealing with a unified actor, much less a unified and coherent rational actor” (p. 133). Roxborough nicely demonstrates, through an outstanding analysis of the evolution of Ireland’s independence movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that the British government was
unable to mount a coherent response in part because of its incomplete control of various elements of its army, the Irish constabulary, the Ulster militias, and the police, each of which had different approaches and levels of commitment to fighting the actors involved in the movement for Irish independence. Eventually, this incoherence and conflicting agendas enabled the Irish to prevail and win their own state – with, once again, the leaders of a social movement becoming the leaders of the new government.

Even in authoritarian states, the repressive forces of the state may be divided. In the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, the excessively harsh and humiliating treatment of petty opposition (including the horrific death of Khaled Said) by the police eventually led to massive protests. Yet the police by themselves, however good at informing on the opposition and controlling limited demonstrations, were simply unable to cope with uprisings that grew to include tens of thousands. However, the army, when called upon, refused to attack the revolutionary crowds, and indeed moved to protect them and support their demands for a change in regime. As analysts of state forces from Katherine Chorley (1943), Stanislaw Andrzejewski (1954), and D.E.H. Russell (1974) to Zoltan Barany (2011) have shown time and time again, the loyalty of the army is critical to authoritarian regimes when facing large-scale protests. Yet the armed forces themselves are often internally divided, with those divisions reflecting the cleavages in the broader society (Goldstone, 1991: 241-243). Ethnic divisions, or strife between junior and senior officers, or even inter- and intra-service divisions (as in the USSR in 1991, when elements of the military leadership planned and began a coup only to find that other elements in the military leadership would not support them), and not simply the defection of the army as such, may be the factor that transforms the social movement field.

David Cunningham and Roberto Soto-Carrion provide a fascinating narrative of how the ambiguity in the role of police extends right down to the role of certain individuals. Infiltrators are required to simultaneously act as police and as social movement activists. The brilliance of this chapter is to show that infiltrators for the FBI – George Dorsett and Gary Thomas Rowe in the KKK, and Ernest Withers in the Civil Rights Movement – were not just tools of the police. Rather, they played their role on both sides with skill and autonomy. Withers in particular made such singular contributions to the progress of the Civil Rights Movement that he was acclaimed as an activist, so much so that the revelation of his role as an FBI source was greeted with incredulity. Again, we find the overlap of challengers, incumbents, and governance units not merely across organizations or time,
but simultaneously, for long periods, within the role and actions of single individuals.

The last two chapters in this volume, by Vince Boudreau and Clifford Bob, demonstrate the importance of arenas in shaping the interaction of states and protestors. Showing very clearly that not all governance units are alike, these two essays span a range – from the dictatorships examined by Boudreau to the multinational global governance unit that the UN aspires to be, examined by Bob.

In Boudreau’s dictatorships, regimes have to calculate how to deal with dissent in a way to preserve their power at the least cost to their legitimacy. Still, that usually leaves challengers isolated and incumbents intimidated, except in the exceptional conditions of state breakdown that can lead dictatorships to dissolve suddenly in revolutionary tumults (Goldstone, 2014). By contrast, in the sprawling, multi-level multinational arena that is the UN, the name of the game is forming broad coalitions with those desiring to keep gay rights off the UN Human Rights agenda (the “Baptist-burqa alliance”) in order to prevent gay rights from becoming a core part of UN concerns. On both sides, extensive networks of NGOs jockey for position, allies, and influence. Yet this is not merely a matter of challengers acting against government forces; indeed, there really are no forces in the UN governance unit acting for or against either side. Rather, what we see is different NGO networks trying to leverage organizational elements of the UN’s procedures to gain institutional support or to block and frustrate action. The governance unit in this case shapes the field not by its actions, but by its structure, which provides certain avenues and limits on how NGOs can seek to create changes in global standards for treatment of gays and lesbians in diverse societies. Nor would the UN even be relevant, except for the fact that many other governance units – those of the member states – are themselves in conflict over the issue. Perhaps the best way to describe this field is one in which international networks of incumbents (with significant power in their own societies) are jockeying for control of decisions in one governance unit (the UN) in the hope of influencing the policies of other governance units (the member states). This is the “global movement boomerang” discussed by Margaret Keck and Katherine Sikkink (1998; see also della Porta and Tarrow, 2005; Smith, 2010).

To sum up, the essays in this volume force us not only to shift away from the simply dyadic core of the state/social movement relationship, but also to move beyond existing schemes of social movement fields, which are still too simple to guide us in understanding the options and constraints that both movements and state actors face. The fields of social movement
action in this book show enormous overlap among movement actors, incumbents (or bystanders) and governance units, both as individual actors and organizations. At the same time, they show enormous internal divisions and conflicts and role shifting within social movements, among incumbent groups, and inside of states. In Figure C2, I have tried to redraw the space of social fields in a way consistent with this reality.

Figure C2 A More Complex View of Fields of Action for Social Movements
The upper portion of Figure C2 (Part A) shows the social movement field typically faced by a social movement in a democratic society. Within the boundary of the society, there are no clear lines separating challengers, incumbents (everyone is in the boundary of the state), and the state. There are multiple challengers and challenging organizations, with diverse links among them. Some of these – such as the municipal governments in the Netherlands discussed by Verhoeven and Bröer or the state governments in the United States that have legalized the sale of marijuana – are wholly inside the state or are themselves governance units. The actors and institutions within the state are varied and disparate with considerable autonomy and separation among them, having varied links to challengers and external actors and organizations (which also link to various challengers and other groups). As one example, the anti-gun control movement in the United States is led by the National Rifle Association (NRA). Many members of Congress are proud members of the NRA, which engages in action both through protest and through institutional political action (supporting party candidates, helping to draft legislation, and bringing actions in courts to defend gun ownership). At the same time, there are over a thousand anti-gun control groups that the Southern Poverty Law Center (2013) defines as “patriot groups” and “anti-government militias” driven by their fear that authorities will strip them of their guns and liberties and that act far more radically and wholly outside the state. The field also includes countermovements, which also have varied links among themselves, to state actors and institutions, and external actors and organizations (Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996).

A similar but still distinct field configuration of these elements is shown as typical for authoritarian regimes in Part B. In these fields there are relatively few challenging groups and they are wholly outside the state. The state itself is more tightly integrated and unified. There are other organized groups in society, but they are not challengers; rather, they tend to be corporatist groups allied with the state. Meanwhile, the state dominates relations to external actors and tries to exclude social groups inside society from linking up with external and international organizations except with its approval.

Comparing Part A and Part B, it is possible to see how transitions take place from authoritarian to democratic fields. In an authoritarian society, the number of challenging groups and the links among them increase; within the state the separation and differences among state actors and units increase as well, and some of them start to link to challenging groups (Tilly 2003). Meanwhile, external actors may become more active in supporting
challengers or reducing support of the state. In short, as the field structure in Part B changes to more closely resemble that in Part A, pressures for a shift to democracy grow, though whether that results in gradual reform (as with the PRI regime in Mexico or the end of Franco’s regime in Spain) or more rapid decay (as with the collapse of the USSR) or even revolution (as with the color revolutions in the Philippines, Eastern Europe, and elsewhere) depends on local conditions and the degree of resistance to change.

Is this now too complex a reality to deal with? I would argue not. Indeed, what I believe this volume makes clear is the limits on analysis we face in treating the state, or social movements, or the rest of society, as composed of distinct sets of self-interested actors pursuing characteristic goals across various settings or arenas. Modern complexity theory, as applied to social systems, tells us very clearly that we often cannot explain social outcomes by adding up the separate goals and actions of particular actors or groups taken individually (Root, 2013). Rather, social outcomes emerge from the multiple interactions of various actors and groups in highly non-linear fashion. Relationships move toward tipping points, coalitions build and expand, and security forces hold then suddenly divide and break. Thus, we need to focus more on seeing how state, movement, and social groups and actors overlap and forge relationships, how those relationships shift, and how the arenas and institutions in which they are working shape and constrain their choices and actions. Only then can we do justice to the true dilemmas of social movement actions, and the complex dynamics of how social movements shape society.

References


CONCLUSION


McAdam, Doug, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer Zald. 1996. *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures and Cultural Framings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


