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Social Movements in Organizations

Mikaila M. L. Arthur
Rhode Island College, marthur@ric.edu

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Mikaila Mariel Lemonik Arthur
marthur@ric.edu

Abstract

This article reviews the literature on social movements within organizations such as colleges and universities, corporations, religious orders, and governmental agencies. It brings together work from disparate fields to advance an understanding of how movements happen within organizations to introduce students and scholars to the promise of such research.

Keywords

Organizations, institutions, social movements, activism, change, protest

Classical social movement theory tends to depict movements as outsider groups protesting the policies of a democratic state. But as Amy Binder argues, "the kinds of struggles that have become far more common…take place within institutions rather than 'in the streets'; and they target institutional power rather than what is ordinarily considered to be 'political' power" (Binder 2002, 11). This article asks how sociology and cognate disciplines have come to understand such movements within organizations (the term "organizations" will be used throughout this article to maintain consistency). When do they emerge? Who are the activists? What strategies and tactics do they choose? And finally, what are their impacts?

Definitions

Social movements scholars differ about how to define social movements, but most agree that essential components of the definition include the ideas that social movements consist of *organized contention* undertaken by a *group or collectivity* that shares some sort of common goal, and that this contention is engaged in by those who are in some sense *excluded from "politics as usual."* The first part of this definition is important because it differentiates social movements from other sorts of collective action, such as riots or panics. But the second part of the definition is more essential to the discussion here. The argument that social movements consist of those who are excluded from political participation has led many social movements scholars to see social movements as targeting only or mainly state or local governmental actors, especially those who are part of formally democratic state systems (Amenta and Young 1999a, Kitschelt 1986, Kriesi 2004). As this article will show, scholars who work on social movements within organizations often rely on a different understanding of the dynamics of exclusion: those who participate in social movements targeting organizations may in fact be participants in "politics as usual" while simultaneously facing structural exclusion from particular decision-making processes (Grossman 2005) or being rendered invisible by

the cultural politics of the organization (Slaughter 1997). In these circumstances, the excluded

groups can and do resort to collective action (Scott 2001).

Just as scholars debate the precise definition for social movements, they debate the precise

definition for organizations. In general, organizations can be understood as "patterns of

relationships" that are in some sense planned or otherwise formal (Hunt 2007). Organizations are

particularly important objects of study in the contemporary world insofar as people live increasingly

significant portions of their lives within them—think about the power of hospitals, formal religion,

schools, corporations, the military, and other similar bodies in shaping the experiences of those who

participate in them. As this list makes clear, organizations today play important roles in regulating

human behavior, structuring inequality, and determining access to resources, the very reasons why

social movements organize.

Social movements research and organizations

The history of scholarship on social movements has included a number of prominent threads of

research on social movements and organizations; none, however, have considered social movements

within organizations as a distinct phenomenon worthy of study on its own terms. Perhaps research

on labor movements and labor organizing has been most visible. Such movements target

organizations—the corporations or other employers for which workers labor—as well as states that

have the power to regulate labor conditions and the terms of organizing. However, labor

movements and union organizing have several features that differentiate them from social

movements within organizations more generally: workers in unionized workforces usually do not

have access to insider or even marginal status, instead being entirely excluded from access to

decision-making power; they tend to focus on a particular set of tactics of limited applicability in

other contexts, such as strikes and work slowdowns; and they often strive for the perpetuation of

the movement itself, whereas movements within organizations generally focus on the achievement of a particular goal or set of goals.

A second body of research concerns student movements in colleges and universities, particularly the 1960s and 1970s student movements that arose across the globe. While this body of research does address movements within organizations, it has largely been grounded in the older collective behavior tradition that asked why people participate in movements and gave individualistic or psychological answers rather than focusing on broader questions of movement emergence, strategy, and impacts (see, for instance, Clarke and Egan 1972, Degroot 1998, Lipset 1967, 1976).

Third, another body of research has considered social movements that target organizations from outside. These movements often see organizations as intermediaries between their own marginalized social or political position and the state policies they wish to change; they therefore target organizations, especially multinational corporations, as a way of influencing national or international policy. Examples of these sorts of movements include the anti-globalization and anti-corporate movements (Klein 2000), social movements in science that target research communities (Epstein 1996), the use of boycotts in connection with the "Killer Coke" campaign and the unionization of grape pickers in California, lunch counter sit-ins during the Civil Rights movement in the American South, and contemporary activism related to trans fats in foods (Schleifer 2007).

What, then, do contemporary social movements theorists say about movements within organizations? In many cases, nothing. Theorizing that focuses on framing (Benford and Snow 2000, Cress and Snow 2000, Snow and Benford 1992, Snow, Jr., Worden and Benford 1986) or collective identity (Hunt and Benford 2004, Polletta and Jasper 2001) rarely deals explicitly with the question of movement targets. Similarly, resource mobilization theory, which argues that the level of grievances in the population that allow for movement emergence remain constant when the level of resources available to the aggrieved population rises to a sufficient level (Edwards and McCarthy

2004, Jenkins 1983, McCarthy and Zald 1977), generally does not specify the target types to which the theory applies. Though Jenkins does suggest that resource mobilization theory is best adapted to explaining movements in democratic states, the model has been used to understand movements in organizations (Zald and Berger 1978). Models that focus explicitly on the political aspects of movements, such as the bargaining perspective (Burstein, Einwohner and Hollander 1995), political process theory (Goodwin and Jasper 1999, McAdam 1982), political opportunity/context (Kitschelt 1986, Kriesi 2004), and political mediation (Amenta and Caren 2004, Amenta, Caren and Olasky 2005, Amenta, Halfmann and Young 1999, Guigni 1998) are fairly explicit about the fact that their models are adapted for explaining movements that target democratic states.

The differences between states and organizations

Max Weber defined states as having a monopoly over the legitimate use of physical force or violence within a given territory (Weber 1946). For the most part, it is clear from this definition that organizations are quite different from states. Organizations do not generally have a monopoly on violence or a specified territory, though the distinction is complicated in the case of such organizational forms as college campuses or company towns that do control bounded plots of land and which do employ their own internal police forces. These differences do not necessarily diminish the significance of organizational control over individual lives, however. As Zald notes, both organizations and states contain internal stratification systems, rules, and social control mechanisms (Zald and Berger 1978). Though these similarities are important, they do not outweigh the need for a distinct understanding of the dynamics of movements within organizations.

What do we know about movements in organizations?

Researchers who study social movements ask four core questions. First, researchers ask when and why movements emerge. Second, researchers ask who gets involved with movements and why they take this step. Third, researchers ask what particular strategies or tactics movements choose and what the effects of these choices are. And finally, researchers ask what the outcomes of social movements are and what factors enable movements to have these impacts. Research that looks at social movements within organizations asks these same four questions.

When and why do movements emerge within organizations?

All organizations experience pressures to change aspects of their missions, practices, members, and other characteristics, but not all of these pressures come from movements. Pressures may come instead from regulatory agencies, peer influences, or other external factors (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, Kraatz and Zajac 1996, Scott 2001). In cases where social movements emerge within organizations, they tend to challenge some aspect of organizational identity, construction, or practice as part of a push towards organizational change. Scholars of organizations suggest that pressures for change are most likely to develop into movements when the organization itself is hostile to the particular changes sought (Clark 1968, Santoro and McGuire 1997), when no clear organizational structure governs the organization (Darkenwald 1971), when "institutional contradictions" emerge (Seo and Creed 2002), or when movements deal with complex and technical questions (Santoro and McGuire 1997). In summary, movements are likely to emerge within organization in situations where the change sought is particularly difficult for the organization to come to terms with and when the organization itself experiences considerable ambiguity about its goals, structure, or identity.

Who are the activists?

Activists in social movements within organizations can be positioned either as organizational insiders or organizational outsiders. This binary distinction is clearly a reduction of much more complex organizational realities—as Werum and Winders note, there are degrees of insiderness and many movements and movement activists are positioned somewhere in between the two extremes (Werum and Winders 2001). However, it is still analytically useful to consider the distinction between insider and outsider status.

Katzenstein argues that the primary factor in determining whether an individual is an insider or an outsider is the degree to which that individual is accountable to the organization. She outlines three forms of accountability, "*financial* (who funds who, who scrutinizes the budget), *organizational* (who reports to whom), and…*discursive* (whom activists identify with)," and argues that these combine multidimensionally to shape individual activists' experiences of accountability (Katzenstein 1998, 38). To Katzenstein, true insiders are the most accountable across these three dimensions. Insiders are those with some access to decision-making power or to decision makers, those who have long-standing or emotionally intense relationships to the organization, those who are particularly subject to organizational authority and discipline, and those who have a high degree of knowledge about organizational cultures and practices. These different dimensions of insiderness need not always correspond, as in Grossman's depiction of the rank-and-file insider "excluded from important institutional decisions" (2005, 34) who nonetheless may be culturally aware and have routine access to individual decision makers.

In contrast, organizational outsiders lack accountability, cultural knowledge, and connection to the organization. Activists of this type are more common within movements that target organizations from outside, but they may be found in movements that occur within organizations as well (DeSole and Butler 1990, Eisenstein 1996). Examples of such outsider activists may include

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low-level and recently hired employees in large corporations, undergraduate students in large public universities, or clients of social services agencies.

Though theorists disagree about the degree to which activists in movements targeting organizations are truly insiders, most agree that individuals who can bridge the activist and organizational context play a key role. Different movements scholars coming from different disciplinary and theoretical perspectives understand these individuals in different ways.

To some researchers, individuals are truly insiders who have somehow developed a more critical perspective on the organization that allows them to become activists or at least to liaise with activists. Legal studies scholars working on organizational change have called these individuals "organizational catalysts." Organizational catalysts are structurally positioned as insiders—they can work within the organization, follow organizational rules, and access organizational knowledge, in many cases even holding formal employment in their catalytic role—but they remain accountable to outside constituencies (Carle 2007, Strum 2006, 2007). In a more sociological vein, Rojas and Binder write about "bureaucratic insiders" (Binder 2002, Rojas 2006, 2007) who are institutionalized within the organization but have the ability to make changes to the bureaucratic structure. Santoro and McGuire (1997) rely on a similar concept, though they do not provide a name for the role they describe.

Other scholars place bridging individuals further along the spectrum towards outsider status. Kelly Moore describes "mediators" who occupy marginal statuses in both the movement and the organization and who can translate movement demands into organizational changes (Moore 1999, 104). Patricia Hill Collins calls individuals "outsiders within" who embody creative tensions that allow for new ways of understanding the organization and its practices (Collins 1986). Perhaps the most promising understanding of the structural role inhabited by such activists comes from the business and management field, where these individuals are called "institutional entrepreneurs" or

"tempered radicals." Institutional entrepreneurs deliberately work to change organizations from within in order to advance a particular set of interests, generally those marginal to the organization (Meyerson and Tompkins 2007), whereas tempered radicals have successful careers within and identify with organizations that they are a part of, but are simultaneously outsiders to the organizational culture because of their ideals, identities, practices, or goals (Creed 2003, Meyerson 2001, Meyerson and Scully 1995, 1999, Strum 2007).

While scholars have articulated the importance of such bridging roles in motivating and maintaining activism within organizations, less work considers what factors lead particular individuals into taking on such roles. It is clear that such individuals must experience something like the marginalization of Simmel's stranger (Collins 1986, Simmel 1950) in order to develop the critical eye necessary to see organizational problems and conceive of activism as the proper response to them. But as Meyerson argues, many people occupy such positions and yet choose silence and "getting along" rather than choosing to mobilize (Meyerson 2001). So what accounts for the emergence of individual activists? They tend to be those who are not yet "coopted" through their own process of career development or assimilation (Meyerson and Scully 1995). Instead, organizational activists are those who have remained tied to "communities of accountability" outside the organization (Carle 2007, Meyerson and Tompkins 2007) that remind them of the continuing problems within the organization or those who are never fully accepted as insiders by the organizations they are part of (Meyerson and Scully 1995). Alternatively, individuals may be driven to activism by moral shocks (Jasper 1997, Jasper and Poulson 1995, Luker 1984, McAdam 1986) that force them to face the continuing organizational problems they would otherwise ignore or by network ties to other organizational activists (Jasper and Poulson 1995, Oliver and Myers 2003, Polletta and Jasper 2001, Snow, Louis A. Zurcher and Ekland-Olson 1980).

What strategies and tactics are used?

Like social movements more generally, social movements within organizations differ widely in their strategic and tactical choices. They can choose more or less disruptive, more or less assertive, and more or less innovative tactics, and they can shape their strategies according to a variety of identities, cultures, and ideologies. Activists can decide to rely on visible protest or unobtrusive mobilization (Katzenstein 1998), and they can choose whether to target only their immediate surroundings or to challenge the entire organization (Meyerson 2001). However, movements within organizations have an additional strategic decision to make: whether to engage in activism on a primarily insider or a primarily outsider basis. Outsider strategies often have the advantage of being more assertive, disruptive, and attention-getting, but they may backfire because of individuals' loyalty to the organization (DeSole and Butler 1990) or because of the organization's capacity to exile misbehaving insiders and ignore undesirable outsiders. Outsider tactics can thus best be used by those who are less reliant on the organization for resources and who are not worried about being expelled from the organization (Lipset 1967)—those individuals who are most likely to themselves be outsiders.

In contrast, insider strategies are less likely to result in severe sanctions, and they have other strengths as well. In particular, insiders have a greater understanding of the structural constraints the movement faces as well as the changes that may be possible (Eisenstein 1996, Santoro and McGuire 1997). But movements that choose insider strategies do face costs. Maintaining insider status requires that activists accept constraints on their activity—they must be moderate, organizationally responsible, conform to organizational norms, and abide by organizational rules—or they will almost certainly face expulsion (Grant 1990, Grossman 2005). These constraints limit insider activists' ability to be disruptive and assertive. Insider activists consequently see themselves as walking on a tightrope between their desires to make change in their organization and their (real or strategic) loyalty to the organization. This tightrope walk may make insider activists seem less

forthright in their critiques of the organization and less radical overall when observed by outsiders (Katzenstein 1998).

Despite the limitations incurred by insider strategies, some analysts argue that organizational activists who wish to make a significant difference in their organization will still choose "disruptive, wide-spread, long-term challenges" (Moore 1999, 99). It is important to note, though, that the meaning of "disruptive" may be quite different for an organization than for a state (Grossman 2005). Activities which are not assertive, violent, or antagonistic may still be disruptive if they challenge daily routines, threaten organizational self-image, or reveal hidden realities.

Because of the limitations of insider strategies, many movements within organizations do not choose to utilize such disruptive strategies. Instead, they may focus on much smaller and quieter forms of resistance, such as creating spaces for change and learning, working to build on small wins, using silence strategically (Creed 2003), claiming identity, and other acts of discursive activism, (Creed and Scully 2000, Raeburn 2004). Such covert forms of activism can even become disruptive, as when activists rely on sabotage or theft (Morrill, Zald and Rao 2003), though this is less likely when activists strongly identify with the organization (LaNuez and Jermier 1994). Sometimes these individual activist acts may be so small that they do not attract attention or notice from the target, although they still play an important role in an overall change campaign (Meyerson 2001), particularly because small acts of activism can deflect attention from the existence of an organizational challenge is under way (Meyerson and Scully 1999). These subtle forms of activism have much in common with James Scott's notion of the *hidden transcript*, a form of backstage dissent that is expressed only anonymously, covertly, or when normal rules of action are suspended (Scott 1990). In fact, using strategic silence or other covert tactics creates a special tactical opportunity: the chance to use the sudden claiming of voice (Creed 2003). As Scott writes, the first public declaration

of a set of ideas that has been hidden, whether in linguistic form or by "a public breaking of an established ritual" "carries the force of a symbolic declaration of war" (Scott 1990, 8 & 215).

Such uses of voice and silence are types of discursive activism particularly at the disposal of organizational activists. Like social movements more generally, movements within organizations have the ability to use cultural and moral power to shape and redefine a situation (Katzenstein 1998), creating openings for subsequent strategic choices and for the process of change itself. Movements within organizations do differ from other movements in the specific elements of discursive activism that matter to their strategic choices. They face less pressure to create messages and frames that resonate with the public or with organizational membership at large. Rather, they need to target their framing strategies directly at those with decision-making power (Binder 2002). These frames need to resonate with both activists and decision-makers and to be constructed to communicate openly with members of both groups (Meyerson and Scully 1995).

What enables movements to have an impact?

Social movements scholars have paid less attention to movement impacts than to other phases of social movement existence (Amenta and Caren 2004, Amenta and Young 1999b, Guigni 1998), and research on movements within organizations is no exception. Some studies do look at the impacts of particular movements targeting particular organizations, if not always in a way that is generalizable to the broader population of movements targeting organizations (Rao, Monin and Durand 2003, Rao and Sivakumar 1999, Wilde 2004). More broadly, movements within organizations are likely to have a greater impact when they shape their strategies to the context of the organization they are targeting (Arthur 2007). The specific tactics that seem important are visible protest strategies that disrupt organizational routines without necessarily disrupting organizational functions (Katzenstein 1998, Rojas 2006). Furthermore, as many of the models of activists discussed above have mentioned, members that are only somewhat marginal to the organization may be associated with greater

impacts (Wilde 2004). As the collective goods framework for understanding movement impacts suggests (Amenta and Caren 2004, Amenta and Young 1999b), movement impacts are not limited only to those changes desired and actively sought by a particular movement. Movements that break ground in one individual organization can echo across an organizational field as other similar organizations feel pressure to imitate the changes the original organization adopted or at least to respond more quickly to their own homegrown activist campaigns (Raeburn 2004).

A discussion of movement impacts is not complete without a discussion of movement repression (Earl 2003). Movements targeting organizations may be less likely to experience certain of the most severe forms of repression, such as imprisonment or physical harm, but they remain quite susceptible to the effects of repression. Sanctions such movements face can range from the fairly extreme, such as firing or expulsion, to the quite mundane, such as a negative comment on a formal evaluation. Unlike for state-based movements, even the more minor sanctions can in some cases stifle dissent because participants worry for their friendships, identities, and livelihoods (Katzenstein 1998). Partly for this reason Kelly Moore sees organizations as "benevolent, nondemocratic states" in their responses to activism (Moore 1999).

Conclusion

It is in organizations that our contemporary lives are lived. We are born in hospitals, educated in schools, build our careers in corporations, engage in recreation within formal religions or clubs, retire to adult communities, and return to hospitals to die. As such organizations encompass more of our lives, it is more important to understand the dynamics of political contestation that occur within them. The scholarship on movements within organizations has begun to demonstrate its promise in producing worthwhile scholarship. We have seen that movements within organizations emerge in situations of unresolved organizational conflict and that organizational activists bridge their loyalty to the organization with their marginalized ideas or identities. These movements choose

strategies that disrupt organizational routines without shutting organizations down as well as engage in discursive and other forms of covert activism. Movements within organizations face significant repression, and they are best able to have an impact when they match their strategy to the organizational context.

There is room for much more scholarship in this field. Many questions remain. Little work has been done on the impacts of movements within organizations. What enables such movements to have an impact? In what circumstances do impacts spread beyond the original organization? What particular forms of repression are most difficult for movements to overcome? And how does the use of covert activism affect movement outcomes? In addition, questions remain about the circumstances that give rise to movements within organizations, particularly what factors affect strategic choice and the emergence of movement activists. Finally, how do movement activists mobilize others within the organization to participate in movement activism, particularly in the face of threats of repression? These questions and many others need to be answered in order for scholars to develop a full understanding of the dynamics of movements within organizations.

Acknowledgement

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