Chapter 40

Social Movements and the Multilateral Arena

Pp. 607-618 in *Oxford Handbook on Social Movements*

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Abstract
Most social movement research privileges the state as the main, if not the sole arena where social movement contestation takes place. By drawing from work in political sociology, international relations, and political economy of the world-system, scholars can improve understandings of the ways political conflicts are embedded in extra-local contexts. This essay clarifies some assumptions embedded in state-centric approaches and explores ideas at the borders of social movement scholarship and related fields about how the world beyond states impacts conflicts at local, national, and global scales. Having engaged the inter-state arena in unprecedented ways during the 1990s, many activist groups saw more clearly this system's limited capacities for responding to deepening global crises. The early twenty-first century thus saw a growth in transnational social movement activity *outside* the inter-state arena. This encourages us to re-think relationships between social movements and not just the state, but also the inter-state system itself.

Keywords: Transnational activism, inter-state politics, academic disciplines, constructivism, United Nations, corporate globalization, world-systems analysis, World Social Forums

Globalization, the process of expanding and intensification of transnational exchanges and relationships, affects social movements. As states have become more inter-connected, ideas, goods, people, money, and communications flow more quickly and easily across national borders. This has shaped both the grievances around which people organize as well as the resources with which challengers can wage their struggles. Nevertheless, much social movement research continues to privilege the state as the main, if not the sole arena where social movement

contestation takes place. By drawing from work in political sociology, international relations, and political economy of the world-system, scholars can improve understandings of the ways political conflicts are embedded in extra-local contexts. This essay clarifies some assumptions embedded in state-centric approaches and explores ideas at the borders of social movement scholarship and related fields about how the world beyond states impacts conflicts at local, national, and global scales.

Research on transnational dimensions of social movements, like earlier social movement research, shows that ongoing processes of contention between social movements and political authorities shape the basic institutions of societies, namely states (cf. Tilly 1978; Tarrow 2011). What we've learned from this latest work is that social movements have shaped transnational institutions—including inter-governmental organizations and law—in ways similar to their influences on national institutions (Smith 2008; Khagram 2005; Rajagopal 2003). In short, by engaging in transnational claims making, social movement actors helped generate more democratic and inclusive international norms and create institutional practices and procedures that expand participation in politics and otherwise reflect and reinforce these norms. They have helped define states' legitimacy to reflect popular demands for participation and elite accountability, rather than merely military and economic priorities. In the course of their varied struggles for human rights, environmental protection, peace, and other claims, movements have secured a place for civil society actors in the world of states. Yet, although they have become recognized actors in world politics, the contradictions between the democratic impulses of movements and the requirements of the global capitalist system are becoming more apparent, and there is evidence that many are looking outside the system of states to address the world's most pressing conflicts. Having engaged the inter-state arena in unprecedented ways during the

1990s, many activist groups saw more clearly this system's limited capacities for responding to growing problems. The early twenty-first century thus saw a growth in transnational social movement activity *outside* the boundaries of inter-state politics. This development encourages us to re-think relationships between social movements and not just the state, but also the inter-state system itself. It also raises the question about what roles and actions social movements may play in efforts to fundamentally transform states and the capitalist world-system.

Transnational Social Movements and International Institutions

Early work on how movements transcend national boundaries demonstrated that social movement engagement in transnational political arenas helped define global institutions and norms, engage transnational actors in domestic or national conflicts, and challenge or resist global institutions. The global arena, in short, was a source of political opportunities for social movement at the same time as it helped define the conflicts around which popular groups mobilized and the constraints on popular contention. Considerable evidence shows how movements help lay the foundations for international human rights laws and institutions and defined limits on the legitimate uses of military power. They have played similar roles in enhancing attention to international environmental issues (Willetts 1996; Khagram 2004; Risse et al. 1999; Smith 2008). Social movements have also helped institutionalize international norms by aiding the "domestication" of international law (see Tarrow 2005). Engaging what Keck and Sikkink (1998) famously referred to as the "boomerang effect," transnational advocacy groups draw attention to states' violations of international norms, drawing various forms of international pressure on violators aimed at changing their practices. They may also use legal mechanisms to transform domestic practices and laws in less overtly contentious ways. More recent years

especially have seen rising levels of contention against international institutions (Sikkink 2005). While the bulk of this confrontation has been against the global financial institutions- the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and World Trade Organization, the United Nations and its various conferences have become more frequent targets of movement critics.

Studies of changes in transnational activism over time show that movements' engagement with global institutions and the related work of building transnational organizations and alliances has transformed their analyses and organizing capacities. For instance, UN conferences provided spaces in which activists from many countries could converge to exchange experiences, discuss strategies for advancing global change, and defining shared visions, identities, and priorities (Friedman et al. 2005). As activists developed relationships with their counterparts from around the world, they learned about the complex impacts of global economic policies in different settings. They also learned how to use international mechanisms to press theirs and other states to conform to global norms, and in many cases discovered how ineffective these mechanisms are at changing state practices (Smith and Wiest 2012). Women's movement activists in particular helped articulate critiques of the inter-state system and its capacity for addressing the claims movements raised (Alvarez 1999; Conway 2012; Meyer and Prügl 1999). But a key outcome of some of the earlier transnational activism was its success at expanding the possibilities for individual activists to encounter the global political sphere. By inviting activism around UN conferences, transnational social movements helped expand activists' political analyses and their self-understandings beyond the confines of a single state. This latter point is essential, since the ability to imagine one's self as a citizen of not just a single country but of the world, and to understand a local struggle as connected to global structures is what helps sustain and grow transnational activism. Moreover, by extending the political beyond the bounds of the

state, it helps lead activist to more systemic critiques that target the international system or even global capitalism. For instance, through repeated transnational encounters, feminist activists have deepened their analyses of patriarchy and the intersectionality of various oppressions, leading to more radical critiques of globalization and the state (Vargas 2005; Dufour and Giraud 2007; Moghadam 2012).

Understanding States and the Global System: Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives

Studies of global social change in particular have engaged multiple disciplines in attempts to gain understandings of the multiple, complex processes at work in this sphere. Conflicts in international arenas reflect interests arising from multiple national contexts and play out within institutional frameworks that have their own languages, laws, and logics. At times, international institutional arenas overlap and contradict one another, as when trade agreements impinge on human rights or environmental claims. And the machinations of inter-state politics reflect complex histories—often involving colonial and post-colonial relations—and rules of diplomacy. Thus, an appreciation for the mechanics of institutions and international law in addition to an understanding of geopolitics and the global economy are required to fully comprehend the struggles taking place on the global stage. I have found several traditions helpful in developing my own understanding of this global space.

A logical starting point is the field of international relations which, at least in the United States, is populated mainly by political scientists. Beginning in the 1970s, but especially in the 1990s the field saw a growing recognition of non-state actors, which forced a re-thinking of international relations' conventional emphasis on states as the main if not the only agents of international affairs. This shift has contributed to new developments in this field, and most

noteworthy for scholars of social movements is the perspective known as *constructivism*. This sub-field is informed by work in the sociology of institutions (see, e.g., Powell and DiMaggio 1991), and it stresses the ways that states' interests and priorities are shaped through their engagement in international organizations. In contrast to earlier approaches in the field, constructivists stress the importance of ideas and organizational roles and relationships over power and geopolitics for explaining states' behaviors. International institutions help legitimize states by providing a context within which states' primacy in governance is recognized and reinforced. At the same time, they define state agendas and priorities, insofar as a state's connections with an international organization may impact its interests vis-à-vis other states (e.g., Finnemore 1997; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Friedman et al. 2005). We see interesting parallels with thinking in the sociology of social movements in ideas such as "norm entrepreneurs," and notions that institutions provide resources and opportunities for change advocates. Sikkink's discussion of "norms cascades" and their reliance on institutional dynamics is a particularly helpful illustration of constructivist logics (2011). While much constructivist literature remains centered around questions of how institutional dynamics affect inter-state politics, some recent work emerging from the constructivist international relations field has placed more focus on the organizational dynamics of non-state actors. For instance, von Bülow (2010) examines long-term changes in transnational networks among South American groups working on trade issues, and Wong (2012) explores the organizational choices of transnational human rights groups make their campaigns more or less effective at influencing politics.

Constructivists' analyses of global political change complement and indeed draw heavily from research in the sociological tradition of world culture or world polity. This tradition is grounded in institutional analysis and stresses the ways organizations help define actors and their

interests. Thus, they view global change as an outcome of organizational logics such as isomorphism—the tendency for actors to mimic dominant organizational practices and forms. Thus, the diffusion of ideas such as human rights, practices such as the national regulation and operation of public schools, and values such as progress and economic growth result from underlying organizational logics (Boli and Thomas 1999; Meyer et al. 1997).

Where world cultural approaches are weak, however, are in helping us account for the inequities of power in the inter-state arena and for how these inequities shape the negotiation of conflicts and contradictions in world cultural values. Here is where research in the tradition of the political economy of the world-system is especially helpful. This tradition emphasizes a world-historical perspective for understanding conflict and social change, and a key point scholars in this area make is that all states are necessarily embedded in a broader set of structural relations that are global in nature. Thus, conflicts within those states should be understood in this larger context, since the interests and vulnerabilities of states and social movements are shaped by these world-systemic relations. While institutions are important, central to world-systemic analyses are considerations of a state's position in the world-economy—that is, is it part of the core that helps define the terms of the world-economy, or is it on the periphery and therefore more subject to the influences of core states. In addition, the world-historical context can be important for understanding conflicts at the national or transnational level, and this is particularly so at times of hegemonic decline and systemic crisis, like what we are seeing in the current political moment (see, e.g., Arrighi and Silver 1999; Arrighi et al. 1989; Wallerstein 1974 (2011)).[1]

Elite Responses to Transnational Activism

As scholars began to pay more attention to the place of non-state actors in global politics, their growing participation and influence began to generate responses from more powerful actors. By the mid-1990s, the United Nations began re-assessing the place of civil society groups, and many governments were pushing for more restrictions on civil society access. Reform proposals tended to stress functionalist and corporatist approaches to UN-civil society relations and did not provide for effective participation of civil society or for greater access to influential UN bodies such as the General Assembly or Security Council (Willetts 2006; Charnovitz 1997). At the same time, corporations began paying more attention to international arenas, and formed their own civil society groups—known as "business NGOs" or "BINGOs" to lobby UN officials and government delegates to international meetings (Bruno and Karliner 2002). Right wing and fundamentalist religious organizations also mobilized across borders, in reaction to the progressive gains made by feminists and environmentalists (Bob 2012; Buss and Herman 2003).

This time also saw growth in corporate efforts to "greenwash" their images by, for instance, giving grants to human rights or environmental groups to build schools or clinics or to support social services activities and even environmentally-oriented projects that do not threaten corporate interests. Under pressure from the United States, the UN initiated a "Global Compact" in 1999 to provide a mechanism to allow corporations to deflect criticisms from a growing anti-corporate globalization movement. Under the guise of promoting "corporate social responsibility," the Global Compact asks corporate "partners" to adhere to a set of principles, but it has no mechanisms for monitoring or enforcing these. Thus, it allows corporations to restore tarnished images without changing their practices (Smith 2010).

In addition to more direct attempts to constrain the participation and impacts of civil society activists, elite actors also found ways to channel and co-opt the energies of activist groups. This process of professionalization, institutionalization, and bureaucratization—known as "NGOization" — refers to the institutionalization and deradicalization of social movement demands. Faced with movement challenges, elites seek to diffuse threats to the status quo by incorporating popular actors into the political process and "demobilizing" discourses that threaten dominant interests and agendas (Lynch 2013). The process is not unlike that used in the administration of colonial territories, and indeed has many parallels with colonialism. As Rajagopal observed, "international institutions have played a crucial role in mediating and often deradicalizing the contentious relationship between development interventions and many non-European societies, … [acting as] shock absorbers against mass resistance" (2003:48).

Groups that become more deeply involved in the day-to-day work of organizations like the UN and dependent upon what Aksartova (2009) calls the "Western grant economy" tend to stray from their more radical commitments as they attend to elite agendas, discourses and operating practices. Lang's work uncovers how the institutional logics of states and inter-state politics encourage "advocacy without publics" (2013:93). They do so by structuring incentives in ways that reinforce elite agendas and preferences rather than to encourage public engagement. Ironically, elite interest in engaging with NGOs rests on the notion that these groups represent a public; yet NGOs in this system have little time or capacity for cultivating or activating popular constituencies. This phenomenon has been described as "global governmentality," as civil society organizations are mobilized to advance global neoliberal projects and to reproduce elite-defined policy agendas and models (Ferguson 2006; Goldman 2005; Hammack and Haydemann 2009).

In addition to efforts to limit civil society participation through formal rules of political access and through the provision of resources, governments have increasingly engaged in direct efforts to repress popular participation in multilateral politics. The most dramatic instances of such repression have occurred at the sites of global trade negotiations, including meetings of the Group of 7/8 in the late 1990s and of the World Trade Organization in 1999 and early 2000s. Protesters similarly had escalated tactics to move beyond rallies and demonstrations to employ direct action aimed at blocking delegates' access to these meetings. The growing contention around the rules of the global economy has spread to the environmental arena as well, and since 2007 the global climate negotiations have seen increasingly confrontational protests (Hadden Forthcoming; Bond 2012). The global justice movement's impact at building transnational networks around more radical analyses of the global capitalist economy that link economic policies with environmental, human rights, and other outcomes is likely to shape a more contentious future trajectory of interactions between movements and the multilateral political arena.

Conceptual and Epistemological Borderlands[2]

Scholarship on globalization and on transnational social movements challenges basic assumptions and concepts in predominant social science traditions. This research has sensitized scholars to the ways our thinking is both shaped by and reinforces existing power relations. Academic specialization has served to obscure the impacts of world-historical factors in social relations. Moreover, the organization of academic work and the structuring of professional incentives privileges methodologies and perspectives of scholars in the global North, effectively

"erasing" the experiences and perspectives of those outside the core of the world-economy (see, e.g., Connell 2007; Santos 2007).

A world-historical perspective on social movements is essential to any effort to understand the political significance of struggles in a given time and place. This overview demonstrates how social movements have always been transgressing the boundaries of politics which elites have sought to enforce. In the process they have helped define the modern state and the inter-state system. Even as national states were first becoming consolidated, popular groups were actively mobilizing to define limits of state authority and legitimate uses of state power. Struggles over these definitions of the modern democratic state have always been transnational, even though much of the theorizing of social movements is cast in state-centered terms (Markoff 1996).

Attention to the world-historical context of social movements also helps situate a given conflict within the larger set of social relations, which often include histories of imperialism, colonialism, or other forms of exploitation. This attention to history serves as an important reminder that the state is a fairly recent social innovation and a constantly changing one at that. By the 1990s growing numbers of activists were recognizing that human rights or environmental protection could not be advanced with traditional appeals to the state, since by then neoliberal policies had severely weakened even core states' capacities to address these concerns (see, e.g., Seidman 2004; Tilly 1995). Activists in the South are especially aware of the limitations of nationalist projects for achieving emancipatory goals. Rajagopal reflects discussions in many activist circles claiming that "emphasizing the predominant role of the state in the realization of human rights simply reproduces the same structures that have prevented the realization of those rights in the first place. [...Is] it possible to think of public action that does not depend entirely on

traditional state structures to be carried out?" (2003:193). Indeed, global justice activists have been discussing ideas like that expressed in John Holloway's *Changing the World Without Taking Power* (2002, 2010), rethinking the place of the state in social movement strategies. Social movement research, however, has been slow to escape its methodological nationalism. For instance, many early discussions of transnational social movements centered on the question of whether or not globalization made the state irrelevant. This state-centric framing of the debate obscured the ways global changes were transforming social relations and the state itself (cf. Smith and Kutz-Flamenbaum 2010).

Along with deconstructing conventional notions of the state, transnational social movements help bring into focus the problematic distinction in much scholarship between "the local" and "the global" and between institutional and cultural or prefigurative politics. Many analyses tend to compartmentalize these ideas in ways that masks how movement discourse and practice defy such categorization. For instance, Subramaniam, Gupte, and Misra (2003) demonstrate the complex sub-national networks that connect rural activist networks to national and global anti-neoliberal struggles. Examples such as the World Social Forum process and the World March of Women reveal the innovative ways movements help bridge the local and global and expand the possibilities for local participation in global networks of resistance. More recently, a transnational initiative of activists in the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and other anti-austerity protests called the "Global Square"--organized for the 2013 World Social Forum in Tunis--performed a similar role. Indeed, their major threat to existing power relations is movements' ability to engage people locally in projects of global social change.

In addition to questioning conventional distinctions between local and global, activists and critical scholars—especially those from the global South—have articulated an increasingly

sharp critique of the modernist development project that highlights the centrality of cultural resistance to movements' efforts to change policies (see, e.g., Quan 2012; Escobar 2004). Although integrating this critique into the actual practices of social movements has proved challenging, the emergence of movement spaces like the World Social Forums and the networks it supports has allowed activists to confront and examine the tensions between transformative visions such as those expressed in feminist circles and the actual practices of movements, which tend to reproduce inequities of the dominant order (see, e.g., Conway 2012; Hewitt and Karides 2011). This tension between what social movement scholars have referred to as instrumental and prefigurative politics is being actively engaged in contemporary transnational activist networks, inspired and supported by many years of transnational feminist organizing (see, e.g., Moghadam 2012; Vargas 2005; Alvarez 2009).

Political Imagination and the Sociology of Emergences

Now that we've established social movements as active participants in the construction of political institutions, we can better appreciate what role they might play in the ongoing transformation of the modern state and the inter-state system itself. There is a growing consciousness among activists that they play such a role (Pleyers 2011). This has been possible in large part because social movements have expanded the spaces where they can engage in transnational activity outside of formal institutional spaces, expand popular political imaginations and advance new models of social organization.

Given that states have developed in tandem with and have played an essential role in the development of the capitalist world-system, it follows that any movements envisioning a non-capitalist order must transcend the institutional logics of states. This includes a transcendence of

conventional discourses and conceptualizations of revolutions, as these are also firmly grounded in the historical context of the modern state. The ability to engage with one another outside of the United Nations conferences and to discuss agendas that do not emanate from national or inter-state politics is imperative for such movements. With the establishment of the World Social Forum in 2001 and the proliferation of other sites of autonomous transnational civil society engagement in the early 21st century,[3] I believe we are witnessing the foundations for a crucial transformation of what we now understand as "international politics." These autonomous spaces for transnational movement engagement expand their capacities for what Zapatista activists call "political imagination" (see Khasnabish 2008), fostering creative responses to the institutional dilemmas imposed by the internal contradictions of states and the inter-state order. No longer forced to work within these contradictory logics, activists can imagine new orienting principles for social relations that are not based in violence, exploitation, and exclusion.

Thus, research on social movements requires attention to what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) calls the "sociology of emergences." In other words, we need to redefine how we select instances of social movement struggle to investigate and theorize. Rather than privileging movements deemed 'significant' somehow within the existing political and institutional logics, we must open up our field of vision to include those movements rendered invisible (or largely invisible) by prevailing scholarly conventions and public and media agenda-setting processes. Rather than privileging projects that seem viable within existing institutional arrangements, scholars need to be sensitive to the ways new arrangements may be forming through the practices of actors who are now relegated to the margins of "politics." The transnational relations among social movement actors have altered the place of the state in social movement politics. As they seek ways to address persistent and increasingly urgent problems of securing access to

people's basic needs (i.e., for clean water, food, jobs, etc.) and mitigating climate change, movements are finding that they must transgress the boundaries of the inter-state system. In doing so they are helping to reinvent the notion of revolution as they constitute organizations and projects that enable transnational dialogue and collaboration.

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Notes

[1] For a more extensive review of these literatures, see Smith and Wiest (2012).

[2] I am grateful to Saskia Sassen for suggesting this terminology.

[3] On the World Social Forum and its impacts see, e.g., Smith et al. (2011); Sen (2007); Sen et al. (2012).