Review Essay

ORGANIZING THE POOR


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One unintended consequence of the movements of the past twenty years has been a shift in the angle of vision from the academy. By long tradition, social movements had been viewed with suspicion and disdain by academic social scientists. The dominant theories debunked the motives of participants or reduced them to hapless victims of social forces that produced stress and social breakdown. The main intellectual task in the study of social movements was an analysis of the structural conditions that produce this symptom of social pathology.

The movements of the 1960s and 1970s changed this outlook. An earlier generation had been traumatized by the rise of fascism and the mobilization of various right-wing groups. Their view of the left was refracted through the postwar red scare and the Cold War lens. Fear and disdain, not admiration, drew them to the study of social movements.

The successes of the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the women's movement, and the environmental movement attracted a new generation of social scientists. When they did not themselves actively participate in such movements, they supported the aspirations of participants. And this was especially true for what Piven and Cloward call "poor people's movements." Accounts of farm-worker struggles, of tenant unions, of wel-
fare-rights efforts, of dissident movements within unions, were invariably written by sympathizers, if not participant observers.

Inevitably, this shift in sympathies produced a different theory of social movements. Attention turned from the social forces and conditions that produce movements, to the question of how movements produce their success. Students of social movements focused on issues of strategy and tactics, looking at the problem from the vantage of those engaged in purposeful efforts at social change. A new set of questions animated studies of social movements: How does one parry repression and other, gentler efforts at social control? How does one generate and maintain commitment and loyalty to groups engaged in collective action? How does one avoid factional splits that weaken the capacity for united action? How does one exploit the vulnerabilities and schisms of antagonists?

Resource mobilization theory represents the clearest articulation of this alternative view. The theory explains how challengers, lacking routine access to the polity, are able to gain collective control over the resources of some constituency and to use them in some form of rebellious collective action. The interplay between the efforts of challengers to bring about change and the efforts of their targets at social control provides the central dynamic.

To find a literature that analyzed the strategy of collective action, resource-mobilization theorists were forced to look outside the academy. They found inspiration in the writings of political activists and revolutionaries and in the historic debates on the left about organization and strategy. The competing arguments of Marxists, syndicalists, and anarchists; the great revisionist debate in the German Social Democratic Party; Marx's analysis of the French Revolution of 1848; Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?*, Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*; Michel's *Political Parties*—these are the canons. From more contemporary sources, resource-mobilization theorists draw on the writings of community organizers such as Saul Alinsky and Si Kahn, as well as on various manuals for direct action and organizing by movement activists.

Solidarity and organization receive central places in the theory. Some organization is necessary to carry a challenge, but the argument is not for a particular form. There is no special brief in the theory for centralized, bureaucratic, mass-membership organizations over loosely organized networks of local action centers. The type of organization that works best is treated as an empirical issue. One must specify the conditions under which