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Social Movements and Organization Theory.

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In his influential statement on the development of middle-range theory, Merton (1968: 51) pressed social scientists to develop “a progressively more general conceptual scheme that is adequate to consolidate groups of special theories.” Despite this call to action, scholarship in many substantive areas, including administrative science, has become increasingly balkanized and dominated by specialized concerns. Social Movements and Organization Theory is a welcome antidote to this trend, deftly combining theory and empirical findings from two of the most vibrant areas of sociology. The preface of the book describes a model for how middle range theorizing ought to be done. First, pull together leading scholars from the fields of social movements (McAdam and Zald) and organizational theory (Scott and Davis). Next, organize a series of conferences to get researchers from these areas acquainted with one another and to highlight exciting empirical work. Finally, integrate the contributions into a book-length treatment.

The outcome of this process is a must read for researchers in both fields. Social movements and formal organizations share many salient characteristics -- including goal orientation, boundary maintenance, and activity systems (Aldrich and Ruef, 2006) – as well as a common scholarly heritage, as reflected in Michel’s classic work on political parties and the “old” institutionalist

school of Philip Selznick, among others. Nevertheless, different assumptions have led contemporary scholars in these fields in opposing directions, as McAdam and Scott document in their opening chapter. Organizational scholars tend to focus on established organizations, to conduct sector-specific analyses, and to adopt a Weberian framing of authority relations. Students of social movements, by contrast, focus on emergent organizations, emphasize society-wide processes, and highlight transgressions that challenge institutionalized authority. Despite these distinctions, concepts and mechanisms in the two literatures often parallel one another. For instance, McAdam and Scott highlight social movement counterparts to concepts that figure prominently in recent neoinstitutional analyses, including institutional actors, institutional logics, and governance structures. Similarly, the chapter by Campbell notes that scholars in both fields often draw on similar theoretical mechanisms, including ones pertaining to cognitive framing, network diffusion, resource mobilization, and ecological processes.

Following Merton's case for middle-range theorizing, Social Movements and Organizations allows readers to evaluate the fertility of such comparisons with a rich set of empirical examples. All revolve around a common query: how do social movements and organizations affect one another? The first group of empirical essays in the volume considers linkages that occur through a shared political context, which imposes institutional constraints on organizations and generates a mobilizing context for social movements. A second set of essays addresses the tendency of long-lived social movements to take on formal organizational features, thus becoming social movement organizations. A final series of empirical essays reverses this pattern of influence, considering how social movements penetrate the administrative structure and policies of formal organizations.

The scope of the essays is impressive, with topics ranging from Lounsbury's discussion of institutional variation in the creation of recycling advocacy groups to Strang and Jung's analysis of total quality management (TQM) as a social movement. Other chapters address the interplay of formal organizations and social movements in fields such as insurance rate regulation, lesbian/gay voluntary associations, federated social movement organizations, and transnational social movements. Despite its substantive appeal, the topical diversity also underscores what may be the primary shortcoming of the volume, at least from a Mertonian perspective: how do we step back from the working hypotheses deployed for these particular domains and develop an integrative explanatory account of social movements and organizations? The chapter by Zald, Mayer, and Rao provides one provocative response. The contributors argue that organizational compliance to the pressures posed by a social movement hinge on three organizational properties, including the sympathy that organizational leaders display toward the movement, the capacity of the organization to undertake changes in structure and routines, and the pressures posed by the institutional environment of the organization. Different combinations of these properties may yield a wide variety of organizational responses, ranging from attempts to disregard movement demands and outright evasion to maximum conformity to social movement pressures.

As one recent ASQ forum suggests (see Hinings and Greenwood, 2002), the field of administrative science requires more attention to the connection between organizations and broader societal processes. This volume takes this mandate seriously by offering a rich survey of the interplay between formal organizations and social movements. I hope that this is just the beginning of a long and productive dialogue between these fields.

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