Now We Are Almost Fifty! Reflections on a Theory of the Transformation of Social Movement Organizations

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In 1963, Roberta Ash (now Garner) was a young graduate student taking a seminar on social movements led by Mayer Zald and the late David Street. There were five students in the class. Several times during the quarter Zald led discussions of the many directions that the transformation of a social movement organization (SMO) could take. Much of the discussion focused upon the limits of the Weber-Michels model, which posited the bureaucratizing and oligarchic tendencies of SMOs, summarized as “the iron law of oligarchy.” The basic framework for discussion was provided by Selznick’s open system approach to organizations. Both internal and external sources of pressures to change were examined. Under specific conditions SMOs could vanish, decline, grow, split or merge with other SMOs, and become more radical and/ or develop internal democracy. The students were given a choice of writing a paper or taking a final examination. Considering herself lazy, Garner chose to take a final exam. She was asked to state three or four propositions that were suggested by the class discussions and justify them. When Zald read her answer he immediately thought they could write a paper on the topic.

Since then we have collaborated on one other paper, “The Political Economy of the Social Movement Sector” (Garner and Zald, 1985). Although we both have continued to write about topics related to collective action and social movements, our interests and emphases have diverged. Thus, rather than developing a single response to Arne Kalleberg’s invitation we have decided to provide a conversation between ourselves that responds to the questions he raised in his letter of invitation. Garner begins the conversation.

What I Wish I Had Known

Garner: I wish I had known about all the contentious episodes and social movements that happened in the 49 years after the final exam in Mayer and David’s class! To select a few: the success of the Civil Rights movement and the assassination of Dr. King; riots in American cities; the end of SDS and the...
Weathermen; the death of Che Guevara (who shared our disbelief in the Iron Law of Oligarchy); Italy’s hot autumn; spring in Prague and Paris; Stonewall, the new social movements and the women’s movement; the Iranian revolution; the Reagan revolution; the emergence of Al-Qaeda; Christian fundamentalism as a political force; the collapse of the Soviet Union; the military coups and “return to democracy” in Latin America; the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa; the Arab Spring; Occupy Wall Street; and the Tea Party.

To what extent would that knowledge change what we wrote? This huge stockpile of contentious episodes would have given us many new tests of our propositions, and as Mayer says, would have enabled us to test them in polities that were or are very different from the United States. Knowing about these episodes would perhaps have forced us to devote attention not only to the trajectories of movements as organizations (which we did), but also to the dynamics of contention and conflict, of which movement organizations are an important element but not the only one.

Zald: The examples of various kinds of collective actions around the globe mentioned by Roberta suggest to me that we didn’t think enough about the scope conditions of our analysis. Most of our analysis in the paper assumes a pluralistic society that permits and/or encourages free association. Some democracies, such as France, have had laws that hindered the development of all voluntary associations, including SMOs, while others, such as Germany, prohibit radical organizations devoted to the overthrow of the regime. Although some of our hypotheses might be seen as applying in totalitarian or authoritarian regimes that stifle or strongly regulate the forms of association, the bulk of the analysis ignores these societal differences. For example, hardly anyone predicted the Arab Spring, because the populations had seemed quiescent even though occasionally “the street” spoke. To understand the Arab Spring we would have had to have a much more subtle understanding of passive resistance and ironic and subtle rejection of dominant ideology than we possessed at the time. Arab polities are not the only ones that had sharply constrained social movement expression, but we wrote about societal differences, not the structure of the political system.

I do wonder if we would have been able to write a better paper if we had known more about the normative, coercive and mimetic institutionalization processes (Dimaggio and Powell 1983) shaping the fields of SMOs, just as they shape institutional fields in general. On the other hand, we could not have written this short and overarching synthesis if we had known all that we have learned from the vast development of the conceptual apparatus of contemporary social movement theory and the broader framework of contentious politics. To paraphrase a letter that Randy Collins, the 2011 president of the American Sociological Association, wrote to me: “It is widely recognized that the transformation of the study of social movements is one of the success stories of the last fifty years.” If we had the full use of the contemporary components of analysis—from resource mobilization to political opportunities, to identity, to framing, and so on – it would have been difficult to write such a sharply focused paper, although at the time, it felt like quite an ambitious enterprise.
Have Your Views Changed?

Garner: I would not repudiate or rewrite one word of this article, but I would say that my views have expanded, that I now see a broader range of perspectives. I would like to identify three of those.

I am more influenced by Marxist theories than I was in 1966, and so I am now more inclined to look at the way movements emerge from capitalism as a social formation – not necessarily in any simple one-to-one relationship with class locations, but as a form of action determined in the last instance by the capitalist character of modern societies – and specifically by key features of advanced capitalism (as Buechler [2000] has worded it). I would now give more attention to the media and the “informationalist” aspects of advanced capitalism – to the role of the media, the “society of the spectacle” and information technologies in movement trajectories, a topic that was developed by Gitlin in *The Whole World is Watching* (Gitlin 1980), given a non-Marxist treatment in Sid Tarrow’s work on print and association (Tarrow 1998) and elaborated by Castells in *The Information Age* and his treatment of both informationism and movements (Castells 1997). Sociologists are now extending the analysis to social media and the Internet. (And Zald pipes up, scholars in neighboring disciplines such as communications have made more progress in these areas than have sociologists.)

I have also been influenced by Peter Kerr’s (2001) remarkable book on Thatcherism in which he argues that the welfare state and the curbing of financial capital to the benefit of the working class were only a “blip” caused by World War II and the desperate need to integrate the working class into the war effort, and that Thatcherism represents a return to an abiding and only temporarily submerged baseline condition of English society (and by extension all developed capitalist societies and polities). He underlines how we need to analyze movements in terms of historical shifts in the balance of power of social forces, influenced by these shifts as well as propelling them. His long-term perspective puts a lot of political contention in the neo-liberal era into a broader context, especially deregulation of financial markets and the return to high levels of income inequality that we are all talking about now in the United States (Hacker and Pierson 2010). Needless to say, Hobsbawm, E.P. Thompson and Michael Burawoy have also been big influences.

The second perspective that has influenced my views is work on movement dynamics. An important early effort in this direction was Tahi Mottl’s writing on movements and countermovements, and more recently Doug McAdam, Sid Tarrow and Charles Tilly (2001) have proposed a strong new paradigm that consolidates their many previous contributions. Whether or not we agree with the specifics of the model they propose, they have taken a major step towards putting “movement” back into social movement theory.

Third – a confession: I am increasingly tempted by that “old devil social psychology,” not just attention to emotion, but a real refreshing of the social psychological paradigm of the immediate postwar period (exemplified by the Langs, Bettelheim and Janowitz, and Adorno et al.) as well as an attempt to
integrate it with contemporary work on movement dynamics. I shocked Mayer and John (McCarthy) this year, after the shooting of Rep. Giffords, by saying that we should look more closely at the role of “disturbed” or “disordered” individuals in movement-related activity. Although schizophrenics maybe be a liability rather than an asset to movements, other types of mental disorder can be a resource for movements or a characteristic of individuals who are “radical flankers” or contribute to polarization as McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly define it (McAdam et al. 2001).

Zald: Aside from some nuances that would come from what we have learned in the last almost 50 years, I would not change the basic thrust of the article. The core proposition, that the iron law of oligarchy is too limited and that the so-called law represents one of only many directions for movement organization and movement parties, is certainly correct. It is the case that each of the specific propositions might be modified, and new ones added, if we were starting over today.

In the meantime, research in other areas of the human sciences suggest that the time may be right to return to micropsychological issues and even to neuroscience in thinking about the assumptions of our theories and the determinants of movements and their individual participants. Let me comment upon two issues: the relationship of rational and emotive factors in social movement action and the relatively new theories and research on cognitive cueing and commitments in shaping behavioral choices.

Zald and Ash assume some kind of purposive, goal-directed behavior but do not make their psychological assumptions explicit. Although some of the writings in the 1950s focused on the psychological state of the population – participation as an escape from freedom, isolation and alienation and a search for certainty – it is clear that Zald and Ash ignore those writings, without explicitly addressing their assumptions. The issue of rationality explicitly emerges in the literature with the advent of scholars studying the movements that blossom in the 60s and 70s. As against the older LeBonian tradition that focused upon the milling and irrationality, or arationality of collective action, sociologists who supported the movements saw them as being “rational” in that they focused specific tactics designed to achieve political ends. The economist Mancur Olson wrote a book titled The Logic of Collective Action (Olson 1965) that put the issue of the cost and benefits of participation at center stage. In particular he argued that on a strict cost/benefit basis, collective action would be discouraged in social movements, because the good to be provided would be provided to all in the category of people expected to benefit, whether or not they participated in the movement activity, thus many would “free ride.”

Much research in the 1970s and 1980s attempted to directly test Olson’s claims. Others employ a “soft rationality” assumption: they assume behavior is directed towards political ends and study the ways that groups may provide reinforcement for participation, or have commitments to broader ideological goals beyond those purposes that originally lead to participation. Moreover, participating organizations, such as churches and philanthropic organizations, pursue movement objectives for a variety of moral and professional commitments.
Most of the authors writing in the first round of the resource mobilization and political process research and theorizing ignore the role of emotions in facilitating or inhibiting participation. In a kind of backlash a second generation of scholars begins to examine how emotions play a role in movement activities, often showing how successful movements build the conditions to sustain participation in the face of high risks, or to maintain cohesion in the face of personal danger, or how a growing sense of inefficacy and apathy leads to decline. James Jasper (2011) has written an excellent review of this recent research on emotions and social movements.

I want to point out that much of the work by sociologists and social psychologists on group participation ignores what psychologists and neuroscientists have learned in the last several decades about how the brain works to combine emotion and rationality, rather than see them as separate processes. Emotions shape and anticipate the choices for practical action, leading and facilitating risky activity, or inducing flight or apathy. Some quite subtle and sophisticated statements have been written (Summers-Effler, 2010). What we don’t yet have is an integration of this work with research and theory across the full range of participants, cadre, bystander sympathizers, neutrals, opponents and distant audiences.

We have also ignored the revolution in cognitive psychology associated with prospect theory and everyday cueing and defining of choice conditions. The work of Kahneman (2011) and Tversky has burst on the scene, reshaping how policies and policy goals are formulated and achieved and how individuals actually make choices, rather than how a rational model says they should be making choices. For instance, the very definition of the amount of cost and benefit is shaped by whether individuals will lose an amount of value, say $100, versus gaining the same amount. Most people are “risk averse,” choosing not to lose rather than seeking to gain. A host of everyday features of the context of behavior have been shown to affect choices. How much of our effort should be devoted to an opening in this direction, I am not prepared to say. But it makes little sense for us to totally ignore these developments.

How Did the Article Influence the Field?

Garner: The article contributed to a major shift away from social psychological approaches to organizational and structural perspectives, from a grouping of social movements with irrational collective behavior (fads, panics, fashions, mobs, crowds) to a focus on instrumental reason, and it tilted the whole field very strongly towards research questions that ask about the determinants of movement outcomes. In short, the article took the field back to Weber. Together with Neil Smelser’s Theory of Collective Behavior (Smelser 1963), it marked a huge shift in a direction we are still pursuing today (with concepts of framing and culture thrown into the mix now). Look at various anthologies of the past 10 or 15 years (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996; Meyer, Whittier and Robnett 2002; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001) and the current issues of Mobilization and the social movement and collective action articles in Politics and Society and you will see the “descendents” of Zald and Ash (and Weber).
Measuring impact and influence of scholarly papers is both easy and difficult. It would seem obvious that a widely cited paper is more likely to be influential than a rarely cited work. But the “necessity” of citation turns out to be elusive. Only direct quotations or close paraphrases of paragraphs or sentences are “required” by scholarly standards. Except where specific innovations or theories have to be cited to recognize significant contributions, or where a paper or book depends very centrally on the cited work, it is hard to estimate impact. I welcome the fact that Google Scholar finds that more than 772 books and articles cited our article between 1973 and 2012. (Very few articles in sociology journals receive even 100 citations.) I also welcome that four editors of books on social movements selected our paper for reprinting. But as far as I know, our specific hypotheses were not subject to debate, refutation or empirical confirmation or disconfirmation, although occasionally the article serves as the jumping off point for empirical work (Minkoff 1999).

I find it interesting that although McCarthy and Zald (1977) refer to it twice, it is not central to the argument there. Moreover, when Elizabeth Clemens and Debra Minkoff came to write a handbook chapter titled “Beyond the Iron Law: Rethinking the Place of Organizations in Social Movement Research” (in Snow, Soule and Kriesi, Clemens and Minkoff 2004:163), they refer to Zald and Ash as an “early and relatively neglected work.”

I also don’t want to claim as much for the article as Roberta does. I think it had influence, but I think the trend was there in a few others who were beginning to work in the field at about the same time. We did focus on the organizational side to an extent that others did not. Making the distinction between SMO and SM and pounding it home was a helpful corrective – it had been too easy to gloss over organization and go directly to leaders of movements, rather than organizational competition and shifting demands by potential participants for social movement action.

As a quick way of getting a read on how other sociologists saw its importance, I asked two now well-established scholars, Doug McAdam and Verta Taylor, who were not yet in graduate school when our paper was written, to comment on the importance of the article. McAdam wrote:

The Zald and Ash article made two important contributions to the emerging field of social movement studies. First, by breaking with the dominant tendency to view movements through the social psychological lens of the collective behavior tradition, Zald and Ash implicitly depicted movements as simply another form of rational, organizational behavior. In doing so, the article helped reclaim the field as the proper province of political and organizational sociology rather than social (or abnormal) psychology.

But there was a second contribution as well. Prior to the Zald/Ash piece, Weber’s “iron law of oligarchy” was generally accepted as the last word on the matter of movement development. Born of charismatic authority, movements inevitably grew more conservative over time, “routinizing” the charisma as part of a broader process of institutionalization.
and bureaucratization. With their piece, Zald and Ash convincingly challenged the inevitability of this process, opening up a fruitful line of research and theory into the factors and processes that shaped variation in movement development.

Not bad for a slim 15 page piece penned 46 years ago. McAdam’s view of the article’s importance is close to Roberta’s. Verta Taylor responded by emphasizing the importance of the Zald/Ash formulation for her own research.

[Zald and Ash] stimulated one of the most lasting conceptual contributions I have made in my career as a student of social movements and women’s movements. By defining the concept of movement organization (MO) and laying out a framework for understanding that movement outcomes vary as a result both of intra-movement factors and a MOs political environment of support and opposition, this article paved the way for my abeyance formulation. Zald and Garner’s influence has been far-reaching. For scholars of women’s movements, the abeyance framework, which drew heavily on their approach to movement transformation, has allowed scholars to uncover previously overlooked or unrecognized pockets of feminist activism between cycles of mobilization.

**Current State of the Field**

**Garner:** Right now, this field is hotter than ever – thanks to movements themselves. Movement organizations, resources, mobilization structures and ideological framing remain central concepts for understanding movement emergence, not only within the social movement literature but also in the broader field of political sociology. Theda Skocpol’s book on the Tea Party (Skocpol and Williamson 2012) and her writing on the effect of 9/11 provide lively examples of how this line of analysis can be extended from scholarly historical-comparative work (her magisterial writing on revolutions) to contemporary politics and topics of popular concern. These approaches continue to be within the fundamentally neo-Weberian paradigm to which Zald and Ash placed an early signpost.

By the 1990s, the cultural-discursive turn became apparent in the social movement field (as in so many other areas of the social sciences), but in the social movement scholarship it was always harmoniously “brought into” the dominant paradigm. We can see that friendly reception very clearly in McAdam, McCarthy and Zald’s 1996 volume – reaching out in a welcoming way to framing and including it as the third pillar of the paradigm (with political opportunity structure and mobilization structures), and a bit later in the synthesis presented in Meyer, Whittier and Robnett’s 2002 edited volume, which relates the state (and the political opportunity structure) to cultures and identities, to discursive categories and frames. (And if we wanted to, we could argue that the framing and cultural element of contemporary theories are also vaguely Weberian,
harking back to the concept of *verstehen.* In any case, what is heartening about the field is its ability to maintain the leading paradigm but also welcome and integrate new approaches.

One other important new turn in the route marked out by Zald and Ash is attention to macro-micro linkages (e.g. in Burawoy et al.’s 1991 *Ethnography Unbound,* and already earlier in Zald and Garner’s “social movement sectors” and Zald and McCarthy’s “social movement industries”), whereas in 1966, Zald and Ash had been so blithely mesoscaled. Not that the meso-level analysis is going to disappear, and its continued vitality is clear from Mayer’s current work on institutionalization of movements, as well as his earlier essential contributions on movements in organizations with Michael Berger (Zald and Berger 1978) and the professionalization of movement organizations with John McCarthy (McCarthy and Zald 1977).

As I said earlier, I think the “next big thing” is going to be more attention to movement dynamics, to the approaches that McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly lay out and even to quantitative analysis of large numbers of events over long-time scales (not necessarily only in cycles, but in more open-ended historical frameworks as well). This research will not wipe out Zald and Ash’s contribution, but will take our understanding of movements in many exciting new directions.

**Zald:** I, too, believe the field is “hotter” than ever, and for the same reason: there is just so much happening in the world that demands sociological analysis of movement and movement like phenomena. This judgment is quite different from what I sometimes hear graduate students saying. They look at the body of work that has accumulated, at the handbooks on social movements and all of the textbooks and journals that are published and they think there is nothing left to do. What happens, I think, is that they face what appears to be a well-connected or at least a partially well-connected set of concepts and ideas and take that as a settled field. On the other hand, if they looked outward to society and social changes as things to be explained they would see a world full of cases of different sorts of collective action, with different tactics and modes of communication crying out for our understanding. At the same time, new developments in social theory and concepts and methodology will continue to modify our modes of analysis and the range of conceptual distinctions and connections among concepts.

And last, and this is an “imperialistic” move, I believe that the combined notions of social movements/collective action can be used to illuminate areas of social life today and in the past that have not been much subjected to social analysis. The Protestant Reformation in its many forms and levels can be understood through the lens of social movement analysis, and so can new developments in science and technology (Frickel and Gross 2005). Properly adapted, a social movement/mobilization framework can illuminate many areas of cultural, institutional and societal change.

**Note**

References

Kahneman, Daniel. 2011. Thinking Fast and Slow. Macmillen

Note

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