

A Call for Two-Way Traffic: Improving the  
Connection Between Social Movement and  
Organizational/Institutional Theory

by  
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- ◇ Roberta T. Garner, "Virtual Social Movements"
- ◇ Charles Tilly, "Social Movements Here and Elsewhere, Now and Then"
- ◇ W. Richard Scott, "A Call for Two-Way Traffic: Improving the Connection Between Social Movement and Organizational/Institutional Theory"
- ◇ Elisabeth S. Clemens, "How Shall We Organize? Privatizers, Volunteers, and Policy Innovation in the 1990s"
- ◇ Charles Perrow, "The Rationalist Urge in Sociology and Social Movements: Zald as History"
- ◇ Gerald F. Davis and Doug McAdam, "Corporations, Classes, and Social Movements After Managerialism"
- ◇ Nicola Beisel, "Searching for the Lost Race: Culture in Texts and Images in the Abortion Debate"
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**A Call for Two-Way Traffic:  
Improving the Connection Between Social Movement and  
Organization/Institutional Theory**

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Conferences such as this provide an occasion to celebrate the career and intellectual contributions of respected colleagues, and this particular celebration is one that I am especially pleased to be invited to join. [It is a happy situation when creative intelligence is situated in the person of a good and decent man.] But conferences also offer opportunities and incentives (and deadlines) for getting on with our common work. In my view, the best way to honor Mayer Zald is to attempt to push forward intellectual projects in which he has played a leading role.

A quick preview. In my reading of the record, Zald has been instrumental in providing a bridge between the fields of organizations and social movements. As a student of Charles Perrow (and thus being influenced indirectly by Philip Selznick) Zald was able to introduce important organizational concepts and arguments into the analysis of social movements. The traditional field of collective behavior was reconfigured into an arena of social movement organizations. Zald's efforts, along with those of Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, re-energized a somewhat backward and neglected area of sociological/political analysis and created a new and exciting research agenda that has guided work in this area for the last two decades.

This is, of course, a major accomplishment. Ideas are not easily transported and translated from one field to another. However, a significant limitation of the traffic pattern that has developed is that the movement to date has been largely in one direction only. Organizational ideas have diffused into the study of social movements but not vice versa. It is high time that we consider what organizational scholars can learn from social movement theory.

In this paper, I briefly chronicle the introduction of organizational ideas into social movement theory and then consider at greater length useful insights from social movement scholars that can benefit organizational theory and research. The recent emergence of the new institutional approaches in organizations provides a particularly fertile soil for these transplants.

### **From Organizations to Movements**

During the first decade of his career, Mayer Zald and colleagues worked primarily to apply, extend, and elaborate Selznick's (1949) institutional model of organizations. Developing the tradition extending back to Michels (1915/1949), Zald began in the early 1960s by applying these arguments to the historical development of the YMCA. Zald and Denton (1963; see also Zald 1970) provide a rather conventional examination of goal displacement in response to environmental forces affecting the viability of an association that began with an evangelistic mission but was transformed into a middle-class service organization. Organizational factors conducive to change include a federated, decentralized structure, diffuse goals, low professional development, and an enrollment economy: increasing dependence on fees from services.

However, beginning during the mid 1960s, Zald became a part of a movement of social movement scholars, including Charles Tilly, Bill Gamson and John McCarthy, who began to inject more explicit organizational and political arguments into the study of social movements. In an early paper with Roberta Garner (Zald and Garner 1966), Zald expanded Selznick's conception to consider the effects of a variety of internal and extra-

organizational processes that could affect the development of movement organizations. Goal displacement and oligarchic expansion were not viewed as inevitable accompaniments of movement evolution, but as one among a range of possible outcomes mediated by the relation between the organization and its wider environment, interorganizational competition for support, exclusivity of membership, and type of leadership. Rather than emphasizing the impetus for movements in common grievances and a sense of injustice, attention was focused on mobilization processes essential to harness and maintain the energies required for sustained social action. More generally, what has come to be known as resource mobilization theory emphasized the importance of seeking support not only from followers but external constituencies, the tactics of attracting allies and neutralizing opponents, and the necessity of extracting resources from the wider societal environment. (McCarthy and Zald, 1977)

From an organization theory standpoint, several central themes have been borrowed and adapted and are reflected in this work. First, social movements, if they are to be sustained for any length of time, require some form of organization: some type of leadership and administrative structure, incentives for participation, membership criteria, a regularized flow of resources, etc. Second, organizations are open systems, affected not only or primarily by the characteristics of membership and internal structures, but by the nature of the environment—the wider social, economic, and political context within which the organization operates. Third, environments themselves have structure. They are differentiated: they contain potential allies and competitors, and there are multiple potential sources of support. And environments are

integrated. The various organizations—partners, competitors, support sources—are organized into networks; all are enveloped in and affected by wider ideas and beliefs, and all are shaped by the actions of the state.

Fourth—and this theme is heavily stressed in the social movement applications—organizations exist not just in a world of resources and economic transactions, but in a world of power. Political processes receive close attention. The social movement literature is full of terms like activism, interest aggregation, contenders, countermovements, tactics, coup d-etats, insurgency, repression, and suppression. (See, e.g., Zald and Berger 1978; Zald and Useem 1987) The analysis developed reflects a political economy framework. (Wamsley and Zald 1973).

### **Contrasting Emphases and Parallel Developments**

The work I have so briefly reviewed understates the extent to which borrowing and adaptation was associated also with innovation. This is particularly true of efforts related to the latter two themes: attention to power and political processes and to the organization of environments.

A cursory review of the social movement literature reveals much more attention to power and political processes than is characteristic of mainstream organizational analysis. With the exception of the work of a few scholars, including Perrow (e.g., 1986) and Pfeffer (e.g., 1981), political processes within organizations have not received sustained and systematic attention in the organizations literature. The language of administration and economics—of efficiency, of technology, of designing

systems and arranging boundaries—has for many years trumped that of power and politics in the discourse of conventional organizational theorists. This tendency has become more pronounced over time as organization scholars are more often housed in and, increasingly, trained by schools of business and management. It has been left to the social movement theorists to seriously examine political processes within organizations, to relate them to similar discussions in other types of political systems, and to explicitly link them with processes of organizational change (e.g., Zald and Berger 1978). [Interestingly enough, Philip Selznick in his later work (see Selznick 1969; 1992) has developed the theme of organizations as “private governments” and examined the processes by which “citizen-type” participant rights have been pursued and legitimated.]

At the same time movement scholars, again led by Zald, have examined in detail the struggles for power and resources occurring outside the focal organization (see Zald and Useem 1982). Such a focus is somewhat more common in the mainstream organizational literature because of the popularity of the resource-dependence framework developed by Pfeffer and Salancik (1978), Marxist-inspired attention to corporate elites and the mechanisms by which they seek to preserve and extend power (e.g., Mizuchi, 1982; Davis 1996), and the interest among management scholars in strategic decision processes and tactics (e.g., Mintzberg (1983). Again, however, the treatment of these processes by social movement scholars connects them more explicitly with political activities and social conflict theory.

Beginning during the late 1970s, a number of parallel developments occurred in both the study of organizations and social movements—developments that shifted the

level of analysis above that of the single organization or that of the organization set (Blau and Scott, 1962; Evan 1966) to consider the industry, sector, or organizational field. "Industry" is, of course, a term much used by the economists--in particular, the industrial organization (IO) economists (e.g., Adams, 1950; Bain 1959)--to refer to the collection of organizations producing competing goods or services. MaCarthy and Zald (1977) were among the first theorists to appropriate the concept of industry to further their study of social movement organizations. They added the concept of social movement sector, to refer to a category of "even broader inclusiveness:" all social movement industries within a society. These twin concepts are employed to support an examination of the variety of organizations within an industry and the competitive and cooperative processes generated as these organizations are forced to take one another into account. However, at this stage, the analysis was restricted primarily to the munificence and distribution of resources and to the characteristics and tactics of similar organizations viewed as an aggregate. Little attention was accorded the broader structure of the industry system itself.

A few years later, about the same time that DiMaggio and Powell (1983) were proposing the concept of "organizational field", Scott and Meyer (1983) the concept of societal sector, and Hirsch (1985) the concept of "industry system," Garner and Zald (1985) revisited and revised the earlier definitions. Their new definition is much more inclusive:

The social movement sector is the configuration of social movements, the structure of antagonistic, competing and/or cooperating movements that in turn is part of a larger structure of action (political action in a very broad sense) that may



include parties, state bureaucracies, the media, pressures groups, churches, and a variety of other organizational factors in a society. (p. xx)

All of these conceptions—field, sector, industry system—were remarkably similar. All allowed analysts to go beyond the issues of cooperation/competition between similar kinds of organizations to consider how characteristics and connections between sources of resources, location of members and potential recruits, and broader political systems and actors affecting the nature and fate of field participants.

This organizational field level of analysis has become one of the most important arenas of research in the study of organizations (see Scott 1994). It is of value in part because it takes seriously the open nature of organizational systems and incorporates a wide variety of economic and political forces that affect their structure and behavior. It is also increasingly valuable as organizational actors themselves become more amorphous and unstable (see Davis and McAdam, forthcoming; Scott, forthcoming). As the boundaries of single organizations and organizational populations have become more blurred and permeable, as organizational loyalties diminish and goals are pursued via cross-organizational teams or alliance structures, new units of analysis are required.

Thus far we have noted early instances of borrowing by movement scholars from organization theory and have observed some evidence of independence as social movement analysts have devoted more attention to the power and politics of organizational systems. And, as just described, we see recent signs of some parallel developments as both sets of researchers discovered and have begun to exploit analyses conducted at the level of the organizational field or sector. But in what ways, if any, can organizational theorists benefit from the work on social movements?

Probably there are many, but I will discuss one promising connection that I believe should be exploited.

### **Insights from Movement Theory for Organizations**

As is widely recognized, some of the most original and provocative ideas now being pursued by organizational scholars stem from developments termed the "new institutionalism" in organizational analysis. Organizational studies have been transformed since the late 1970s, as earlier arguments modeling organizations as fundamentally rational, technical systems have been modified to incorporate cultural, institutional factors as being of equal or greater importance. To an early focus on regulative and normative aspects of institutions, neoinstitutionalists in sociology have added cultural-cognitive elements. (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Zucker 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1991) When the full range of elements is considered, institutions are seen to serve vital social functions, including rule setting and enforcement and the promotion of comprehensibility, legitimacy, and social stability (see Scott 1995). Most of the work has been conducted at the societal or field level, emphasizing the effects of "institutional environments" on organizational structures and processes at the field, population or individual organizational level. Early work, however, tended to overstate the stabilizing effects of institutions, ignoring the degree to which institutions are themselves contested and subject to change. Also, early theorists were inclined to overemphasize the deterministic nature of institutions, giving insufficient attention to ambiguity, uncertainty

and conflict in the environment, to interpretative and strategic processes, and to the exercise of agency at the individual and organizational level.

My own work has argued the value of close attention to the three elements that comprise, in varying proportions, an institution. Institutions are made up of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements, but some institutions stress primarily regulative and others normative or cognitive processes. Theorists and researchers give unequal attention to one or another element; and, more important, each of the elements tends to operate via different mechanisms and processes (Scott 1995). Regulatory structures impose order via surveillance and sanctions; normative structures operate through interpersonal and internalized standards and expectations; and cognitive structures exert a more unobtrusive control via their effects on decision premises and taken-for-granted assumptions (Perrow, 1986; Zucker 1977).

While the examination of these institutional elements is, I believe, a useful analytic exercise, it does not provide a particularly effective schema for guiding empirical analysis. Hence when, together with a set of colleagues, I began to design an empirical study of changes over time in the institutional environment of the healthcare field in this country, we decided to formulate a somewhat different set of distinctions. (See Scott, Mendel and Pollack 1996; Scott, et al., forthcoming) We differentiated among three components of institutions:

- *Institutional Actors*—(both individual and collective) that create (produce) and embody and enact (reproduce) the logics of the field.

Actors serve as both agents who are capable of exercising power to affect and alter events and rule systems and as carriers, who embody and reflect existing norms and beliefs.

- *Institutional Logics*—the belief systems and associated practices that predominate in an organizational field.

As Friedland and Alford (1991:248) note, institutional logics provide the “organizing principles” supplying practice guidelines for field participants. It is possible and useful to identify dominant logics that reflect the consensus of powerful actors as well as secondary and/or repressed logics representing other, subordinated interests (see Alford 1975).

- *Governance Structures*—refer to “all those arrangements by which field-level power and authority are exercised involving, variously, formal and informal systems, public and private auspices, regulative and normative mechanisms.” (Scott et al., forthcoming)

“Jurisdiction has not only a culture, but also a social structure,” as Abbott (1988:59) has pointed out. Some of the most interesting recent work in political sociology has explored the wide variety of governance structures at work at the level of societal sectors or organizational fields. (See, e.g., Streeck and Schmitter 1985; Campbell, Hollingsworth and Lindberg 1991.

We view institutions as being comprised of these components. To describe the institutional structure of the healthcare field, we examined the characteristics of the principal actors, tracking changes in demographic characteristics affecting demand for services and changes in the numbers and types of providers, both individual (e.g.,

physicians) and collective (e.g., hospitals and HMOs). We examined changes in institutional logics by assessing shifts in the nature of funding arrangements (commercial insurance vs. nonprofit providers vs. public funding), changes in preferences for alternative medical providers, and modifications in professional discourse as reflected in medical journals. To assess changes in governance structures, we observed the dynamics of membership in professional associations, legislation at state and federal levels, and growth in public regulatory agencies. Of course, the three components are interrelated in complex ways: some features are more tightly coupled than others are, and the causal priority of the components can vary over time.

We view this work as contributing to the study of institutional change, recognizing, as noted above, that until very recently this topic has been relatively neglected by institutional organization scholars. But now a growing number of them have begun to turn their attention to institutional change processes—e.g., Campbell 1997; Davis, Diekmann and Tinsley 1994; Greenwood and Hinings 1996; Oliver 1991; Powell and Jones, forthcoming; Sjöstrand 1993; Thornton 1995—but all of this effort is taking place either in ignorance of or with studied inattention to the work of movement scholars, who have for some time specialized in the study of change processes effected by and affecting organizations.

Indeed, there are striking synergies between the more recent, comparative efforts of movement scholars and approaches to institutional change being developed by students of organizations. The work of McAdam, McCarthy and Zald (1996) provides a particularly strong case in point. They identify three broad factors as

important in examining “the emergence and development of social movements/revolutions”: (p. 2)

- *Mobilizing Structures*—the “forms of organization (informal as well as formal), available to insurgents”
- *Political Opportunities*—the “structure of political opportunities and constraints confronting the movement” and
- *Framing Processes*—the “collective processes of interpretation, attribution, and social construction that mediate between opportunity and action.” (p. 2)

I may be mistaken, but I seem to detect a strong affinity between these categories and those developed by my colleagues and I to examine institutional change. There appears to be a close connection between our concept of organizational forms and McAdam and colleagues’ notion of mobilizing structure; between our concept of governance structure and their idea of political opportunities; and between our notion of institutional logics and theirs of framing processes. Of course, there are differences in emphasis. My colleagues and I were examining changes in a highly institutionalized field while McAdam and associates are focusing attention on the emergence of new forms that challenge the existing order—but this is precisely the difference which we organizational students should attempt to exploit. We need help in thinking about instability and the roots of social change. Let us briefly consider each pair of concepts.

### ***Institutional Actors/Mobilizing Structures.***

In our research on healthcare systems, we examined changes over a half-century in the types of organizations providing healthcare services. We systematically studied when and to what extent private practitioners and hospitals became displaced

as central providers by home health agencies, HMOs, and other forms of coordinated practice. We did examine new organizational forms, but did not attempt to study the kinds of “mobilizing” efforts, formal and informal, that had to precede the development of any new organizational form. Social movement theory provides a vocabulary for identifying and tracking such mobilizing efforts and offers a set of propositions for predicting which of them are more likely to succeed.

Consider four interesting ideas lodged in current work. In discussing how mobilization takes place, Tilly (1978) suggests that there exist a limited number of repertoires of collective action, the particular forms varying by time and place. Depending on whether the claims being made are competitive—resources being simultaneously pursued by several groups—reactive—an attempt to reassert established claims when they are under attack—or proactive—new claims asserted by dispossessed groups—distinctive mobilizing processes are employed.

In a related vein, Clemens (1996) argues that there is also a limited repertory of organizational forms—cognitive models and their associated relational structures—to support collective action. Organizational forms are constrained by both institutional (cognitive and normative) considerations regarding what modes of organizing will be recognized and legitimated as well as by practical considerations: will participants be able to understand and carry out the required activities. Thus, Tilly and Clemens help us to understand why there is relatively little that is new under the sun: why we observe few new ways of organizing and few new types of organizations.

In concert with a number of institutional theorists, including Haveman and Rao 1998; Stark 1996, and Campbell 1997, Clemens embraces Levi-Strauss’s (1966)

concept of bricolage as the predominant construction technique employed in building organizations. Bricolage involves the cobbling together of bits and pieces of familiar forms to achieve new structural configurations. These hybrid creations combine the strengths of the old and familiar with those of the novel and unusual. By employing a familiar structural vocabulary so that change is perceived to be incremental they enable more radical changes than would otherwise be possible.

The combination of continuity and change is facilitated by another factor, noted by both social movement and institutional theorists. Tilly (1978:149) has observed that there has been “a general decline in the costs of mobilization and collective action during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” due to the massing of populations, the growth of organizations, the elaboration of communications and the rise of elections. Meyer and Rowan (1977:345) point to another important resource: the increased rationalization of institutional structures in modern society:

The growth of rationalized institutional structures in society makes formal organizations more common and more elaborate. Such institutions are myths which make formal organizations both easier to create and more necessary. After all, the building blocks for organizations come to be littered around the societal landscape; it takes only a little entrepreneurial energy to assemble them into a structure.

### ***Governance Structures/Political Opportunities***

Much of the current work on institutions, including our own research on medical systems, emphasizes the existence of governance structures—both more localized systems specific to the sector in question and broader political systems that both shape



the localized systems as well as exert independent controls on social activities. Earlier work, influenced by political sociology, emphasized the allocative powers of the nation-state as it distributes resources and imposes taxes. The newer work stresses the ways in which the state shapes the organizational structure of the sector by, for example, determining the rights of collective actors by means of establishing property rights (e.g., Campbell and Lindberg 1990). Earlier work also tended to privilege the actions and structures of public agencies and to neglect private governance structures such as professional and trade associations. Contemporary researchers are remedying these defects.

What can institutionalists learn from social movement theorists about governance structures and vice versa? On the one hand, the perspective of institutional theory seems to me to be usefully broader in its scope than the version pursued by social movement theorists. The latter appears to be restricted by their focus on movements that engender political change with a capital P. For example, movement scholars do not become interested in birth control clinics until they become caught up in ideological disputes between the left and right. Organizational scholars, by contrast, as they increasingly attend to change processes in all kinds of organizational fields recognize the extent to which resources for and resistance to change is embedded not only in conventional political structures—in states, parties, and agencies—but also in established traditions, widespread beliefs, private governments, and professional and business associations.

On the other hand, there is an interesting difference in emphasis in the two fields. In examining governance structures, organizational scholars tend to emphasize the

constraints imposed by existing arrangements. By contrast, social movement theorists stress the presence of opportunities afforded by weaknesses or contradictions in governing authorities. In fewer words, institutional theorists stress "governance structures"; social movement theorists, "structural holes" in these structures (with apologies to Ron Burt). Thus, movement scholars attend to the openness of existing systems, the instability of elite alignments, the presence of potential allies, and weaknesses in the state's repressive apparatus (McAdam 1996; Tarrow 1996)

Institutional theorists should take note!

### ***Institutional Logics/Framing Processes***

My reading of the two literatures suggests that there is more convergence and overlaps in this area than in the other two. This is the case, I believe, because the two sets of theorists have drawn more on common sources in crafting their conceptions of cultural rules and interpretive processes. Both groups reference symbolic interactionism in sociology (e.g., Cooley, Mead, Blumer and Goffman), cognitive psychology (Schank and Abelson), and cultural anthropology (e.g., Geertz and Douglas). (In addition, institutionalists also draw heavily on the sociology of knowledge approach of Berger and Luckmann and on ethnomethodology a la Garfinkle.) In both camps, much attention is paid to framing processes, the role of ideas and ideology in providing motivation and direction, and the role of schemas in providing coherence and structure.

Again, however, there are differences in emphasis. Institutional theorists focus on the power of dominant ideologies and shared cognitive frameworks, social movement theorists, on challenging ideologies and conflicts in beliefs and values.

When change is discussed, different arguments are stressed. The most important institutional theorist stressing cultural arguments, Paul DiMaggio (1991; 1994) has focused attention on the critical role played by culture producing organizations. Such organizations are explicitly in the change business, and have a social license to develop and promote new ideas and innovations. The most important social movement theorist stressing cultural arguments is David Snow (Snow and Benford 1988; Snow et al, 1986), and he has emphasized particularly the importance of "alignment" processes. When one is a suppressed or challenging movement, support depends on the extent to which it is possible to align one's ideas and interests with others, both allies and authorities. Culture is an important form of capital, and cultural forms and interpretative frameworks can be strategically crafted and modified to improve the situation of contenting parties. (Zald 1996)

### **Concluding Comments**

My library research for this brief essay persuades me of three truths: 1) social movement theory has borrowed more concepts and arguments from organization theory than vice versa; 2) recent developments in both areas suggest that the paths pursued have been parallel in important respects, particularly as scholars in both camps attend more to organizational field- or sector-wide processes and to cultural forces; but 3) a surprising level of ignorance is demonstrated by scholars in each arena concerning relevant work in the other.

With respect to the latter point, a perusal of the citations in the principal works of the two camps reveals a startling lack of attention to social movement scholarship by institutional scholars and institutional work by movement scholars. Among all the contributions examined, only two scholars appear to be knowledgeable about contemporary work in institutions and organizations on the one hand and social movements on the other, and to have taken advantage of ideas from each. Elizabeth Clemens and Jerry Davis—thankfully, two of our younger scholars—show evidence of employing wider lens in crafting their work. I hope my comments today will encourage more of us to join their reading circle.

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