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TRENDS IN AMERICAN POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY

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Trends in American Political Sociology

Political sociology has flowered during the last dozen years, part of our legacy from the sixties. The politicization of academic sociology did not prove inimical to scholarly work as many critics feared. Scholars with political engagements turned out to be quite capable of developing rigorous arguments and testing their merits rigorously. Increasingly sterile debates about value free sociology were swept away in a flood of exciting work by people whose research and writing reflect their value commitments and meet anyone's canons of scholarship.

The excitement comes in part from watching false dichotomies crumble: historical versus quantitative, theoretical versus empirical, Marxist versus positivist, collective behavior versus organizational behavior. Increasingly, American political sociology today is historical and quantitative, theoretical and empirical, Marxist and positivist -- or perhaps all of the above. And good riddance to the versus.

What evidence for such sweeping claims? I propose to discuss three exemplars -- works which reflect the emergence of new themes in political sociology even as they influence this emergence. There are many examples but I find that I need look no further for excellent illustration than my own colleagues at Michigan. So I shall practice a kind of proximate sociology.

The Alloy of Sociology and History

Political sociology has long had a close relationship to historical work. We recognize a traditional syndrome of macro-sociological interests that we call historical-comparative-political. I mean something more than this. For illustration, I turn to my colleague Charles Tilly and his book with Edward Shorter, Strikes in France: 1830-1968.

Strikes in France presents a political sociology of industrial conflict that is simultaneously a history of industrial conflict in France from the July Monarchy of 1830 to the events of May, 1968. The history and sociology form an alloy, each gaining strength from the fusion.

Shorter and Tilly use the road metaphor to express the relationship. One road leads "toward an understanding of the ways in which industrialization transforms collective action, especially the collective action of workers. . . . The second road heads toward a comprehensive explanation of changes in industrial conflict in France." As they recognize, the two roads eventually lead off in different directions. To understand the impact of industrialization on collective action, one must go beyond the French experience to consider other times, places, and forms of action. To understand the special peculiarities of French industrial conflict, one must look at various unique aspects of that historical experience, some of which are only distantly related to industrialization. But the two roads "run together for quite a space," and Strikes in France travels that common ground.

What does such an alloy look like more concretely? The fusing begins at the theoretical level. Strikes in France deals with general arguments about industrial conflicts, politics, and social change. The history of industrial conflict in France provides an opportunity to firm these arguments up by confronting them with the rich reality of the French experience of the last 150 years.

The metaphor that Shorter and Tilly choose is a bit more dramatic than firming-up. They suggest that their historical evidence is "a demolition platform for arguments about industrial conflict, politics, and social change. Our exact procedure is to take ideas on these subjects, both our own and other scholars', and hurl them against this giant rock of strike statistics."

Their metaphor is unfair to themselves, of course, for their giant rock turns out to be an intricate and laboriously constructed data set of more than

100,000 strikes, with large amounts of standardized, machine-readable and theoretically significant information on most of them. It is the kind of data set that lends itself to time series analyses and path analytic models, and Strikes in France makes effective use of these tools in demolishing some arguments and supporting others. This part is good standard sociology, distinguished mainly by its success in not letting such tools wag the dog. They cheerfully admit that their book "swarms with tables, maps, graphs, and equations."

The form of this data set makes it amenable to the precision of contemporary causal analysis techniques. But the content of this evidential rock consists of historical events, and in constituting their data set Shorter and Tilly are doing history. Because of the concepts and theoretical arguments with which they approach this historical evidence, and because they know and understand a lot about the social history of France, their numbers take on meaning.

The process of giving meaning begins with the unit of analysis, the strike. Strikes are seen as one form of collective action: they are political acts. They must be viewed in the context of a continuing conflict among three major collective actors: workers, employers, and state officials. To understand the evolution of this form of collective action over a 150-year period of French history, their argument explores how changes in production relations interact with changes in the form of labor organization to produce changes in the form of collective action. This orientation is particularly fruitful for understanding the French experience where strikes were "more an instrument to force the intervention of the state in labor relations than a tool for, say, belaboring employers at the bargaining table."

"Economic interests," they argue, "only find their expression in strike activity in so far as they are mediated and supported by organization for collective action. The existence of that organization, moreover, involves workers in the struggle for political power, and makes the strike available as a political weapon." The unifying themes of politics and organization as

inherent features of collective action are reflected again in their discussion of why unionization in France increased the propensity to strike. It depends, they suggest, on the kind of union. Those that view the strike as a political weapon strike more often than those who don't. Industrialization doesn't stimulate strikes, they conclude, "unless it first grips and modifies the capacity of workers to organize themselves."

Running through this argument is an implicit value commitment, sympathetic to worker movements. The participants are viewed as free men and women, pooling resources to achieve greater political control of the conditions that govern their lives. "Largely as a result of their own collective action (which never ceases but still accelerates into crucial bursts from time to time), organized groups of workers acquire places in the national structure of power."

Their own arguments, however value embedded, must face the same rock of evidence as the arguments of other scholars with different values. Their data analysis produces two major explicanda. Strikes in France employs a simple, useful device for capturing the changes that have occurred in strike activity. The three critical dimensions of this activity are represented as a rectangular box. The length of the box represents the duration of a strike, the height represents the number of people involved, and the depth or thickness represents the frequency of strikes during a given time period. The shape of strikes in France has changed. In the 1830's, the shape was "middling long, low, and paper-thin" -- that is, strikes tended to be fairly long, involving relatively few people, and were infrequent. In the 1960's, the shape of strikes was "short, high, and wide." Besides this striking change in shape, there are strike waves to be explained -- years in which the frequency of strikes takes a leap of 50 percent or more.

The resource mobilization arguments of Strikes in France provide a basis for giving meaning to these statistical changes and provide a persuasive interpretation of the history of industrial conflict in France. The historical experience

of France helps to ground these arguments, sharpening and modifying them in the process. From this happy fusion, the alloy derives its strength.

#### The Rebirth of Political Economy

If some political sociologists today are hard to tell from historians, others are pretty hard to tell from economists -- or at least from the type of economist represented by the Union of Radical Political Economists. Increasingly, American political sociology is developing its own tradition of first-rate Marxist or Marxist-oriented scholarship. In the last dozen years, numerous American scholars have been making their own contributions on such issues as the role of the state in advanced capitalist or post-industrial societies, the role of political organization, and the interplay of class relations and political action. But the keynote of an American style of political economy analysis is a commitment to positivism. For illustration, I turn to my colleague Jeffery Paige and his book, Agrarian Revolution.

Paige presents a political economy analysis of rural class conflict and of the forms of collective action among the cultivator class. Both major rural classes draw their living from the land. The cultivators are those who "perform the physical labor of cultivation in the fields and plantations of the underdeveloped world;" the noncultivators are those who "share the proceeds of this labor in the form of rent, profits, interest, and taxes."

The nature of the conflict between these classes and the political choices open to them, Paige argues, are "limited by the irreducible role of land in agriculture and by the compelling force of the international market in agricultural commodities." His argument begins with the source of income of the two major rural classes. For the cultivators, the central issue is their degree of dependence on land versus wages; for the noncultivators, the issue is the degree of dependence on land or capital.

Agrarian Revolution traces out in great detail how the source of income of

the two classes affects the typical form of agricultural organization: commercial hacienda, small holding, plantation, sharecropping, or migratory labor estate. The source of income also produces a set of associated political consequences. For example, when noncultivators are heavily land dependent, as in landed estate agriculture, the structure of their conflict relations with cultivators is zero-sum. They are not in a position to make economic concessions. By definition, they lack the capital to install the kind of agricultural technology to improve yield, and their income depends on the price of the crop in the world commodity market. Hence, in this form of agricultural organization, the noncultivators tend to be rigid and unyielding in their political behavior.

These economic and political consequences of the source of income of the two rural classes ultimately lead to a set of predictions about the form that the collective action of the cultivators will take. Paige considers various kinds of agrarian social movements and shows why we should expect them to be associated with different forms of agricultural organization. Class-based, agrarian revolution arises in decentralized sharecropping systems. "Only in sharecropping systems is an inflexible upper class combined with a cultivator class strongly organized along class lines, and only in decentralized systems is the cultivator class able to overcome the political controls of the noncultivators. The decentralized sharecropping system, therefore, combines the characteristics of both cultivators and noncultivators most conducive to agrarian revolution, leads to solidarity based on class, and increases the appeal of revolutionary socialism as the dominant ideology of cultivator movements."

Agrarian Revolution shares with Strikes in France a view of collective action as the purposeful acts of people, pooling their resources in pursuit of their economic and political interests. It shares the view of political organizations as major facilitators of collective action. On the role of force, for example, Paige suggests that "Both upper and lower agrarian classes use force in economic conflicts not because they have not carefully considered all possible

alternatives but because they have. There is a calculus of force just as orderly and rational in its way as the principles of economics, and despite the passions which surround the use of violence, it is important to realize that men risk their lives only with the greatest reluctance." As for the role of political organization, Paige argues that his evidence indicates "the critical importance of strong reformist or socialist parties in the organization of an agrarian revolt."

Paige's value commitments are evident in Agrarian Revolution: he sympathizes with the political struggles of the cultivator class. Indeed, he makes such value commitments quite explicit in his preface. "It is important to note at the outset," he writes, "that this book grows out of the fundamental questions raised by United States involvement in revolutionary movements in the underdeveloped world in general and Vietnam in particular. In Peru, Angola, Vietnam, and many other areas of the underdeveloped world, the United States has chosen to side with the landlords and plantation owners against the peasants, sharecroppers, and agricultural laborers who took up arms against them." He thanks the veteran labor organizer H.L. Mitchell of the interracial Southern Tenant Farm Workers Unions for sharing his personal experiences in organizing both plantation workers and sharecroppers, and he thanks the tractor drivers of Louisiana plantations "who kindly invited me into their homes and, at some personal risk given the labor environment of Louisiana plantations, provided me with an insider's view of plantation political economy."

Such value engagement doesn't get in the way of Paige's scholarship or his commitment to positivism. Like Strikes in France, Agrarian Revolution constitutes a data set that is amenable to quantitative causal analysis techniques. The unit of analysis is the agricultural export sector -- a particular country, crop, and geographical region. World-wide, there are 135 export sectors in 70 countries that meet the criteria for inclusion. Paige compiled and

coded information on a broad range of political and economic variables contained in his argument, using a variety of sources including, for the more than 1,600 collective action events, newspapers.

To his credit, he is not satisfied with the level of detail in such an aggregated analysis. Agrarian Revolution also takes a look in depth at six agricultural export sectors in three countries: sugar, cotton, and coffee in Peru, coffee in Angola, and rubber and rice in Vietnam. The cases focus on conflicts of major significance in contemporary world politics and they allow us to examine, in rich concrete detail and historical context, four of the five major forms of agricultural organization and the characteristic agrarian movement that flowed from each. While the results of the world analysis confirm hypotheses derived from the theoretical arguments, the case studies give one a firmer and less inferential sense that the causal mechanisms specified by the theory of rural class conflict are, indeed, operating as the argument suggests. Positivism and political economy make happy bedfellows in Agrarian Revolution.

#### The Blending of Organizational and Collective Behavior

Political sociology has a coin. On one side, it depicts social movements, showing how they contain carrier organizations that consciously attempt to coordinate and mobilize supporters. Turn it over and it depicts organizational conflicts, showing how they sometimes involve mobilization for collective action. To illustrate this coin, I turn to my colleague, Mayer Zald and a pair of his contemporary essays: "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements" (1977) with John McCarthy, and "Social Movements in Organizations" (1978) with Michael Berger.

McCarthy and Zald try to take seriously the idea that there is a social movement industry, not so very different from other industries. The firms in this industry are social movement organizations and, like small businesses in general, there is a high casualty rate. Once established, these entities

pursue organizational survival in addition to their social movement goals, and sometimes these organizational needs dominate their strategy and tactics. Sometimes the whole social movement sector will expand, stimulated by a system-wide crisis such as a depression or an unsuccessful foreign adventure. When this happens, the firms that already have an established position in the industry will be in the best position to take advantage of the expanded opportunities.

McCarthy and Zald recognize, of course, a set of problems that are special to social movement organizations. The central problems of firms in this industry include "mobilizing supporters, neutralizing and/or transforming mass and elite publics into sympathizers, [and] achieving change in targets." In handling such problems, they argue, social movement organizations frequently adopt practices very much like those used by successful firms in other sectors.

Zald and Berger present the other side of this coin. Even in corporate hierarchies, challenging groups may arise without official status or recognition, pursuing some form of organizational change. These cliques or factions face the characteristic problems of social movement organizations: mobilizing supporters, neutralizing those not directly involved in the issues or transforming them into sympathizers, and achieving change in the target. Put these two essays together, and the fields of collective behavior and organizational behavior blend in a political sociology of social movements.

#### An Underplayed Theme

Clearly, I am enthusiastic about much of the work going on in political sociology these days but please don't misread this as complacency. There are some areas where not enough is happening. Our largest gap comes in our understanding of the culture of politics. I am concerned that we don't understand at all well how political consciousness is shaped and changed and how, in turn, it channels collective action.

The culture we live in supplies ways of organizing and framing strips of political events. We understand that these cultural elements shape in some fashion how we interpret politics and our willingness to support movements for social change, but the underlying mechanisms by which this happens are still opaque. We're aware, of course, that the mass media play a central role in this process. Excellent work is going on that helps us understand the historical development and the political economy of the mass communications industry. There are fine studies showing the operation of news organizations and the process by which news is produced. But when we attempt to deal with the symbolic content of the media, to understand how its content shapes political thinking, we grope.

Not that some of this groping is without interest or merit. Edelman (1964, 1971, 1977) on political language and political symbolism, Bennett (1975) on political scenarios, Borhek and Curtis (1975) on a sociology of belief, Burke (1969) and Simons (1976, 1979) on political rhetoric, Habermas (1975) and Mueller (1973) on political legitimation, Hamilton (1975) on restraining myths -- all have something to tell us. But existing work leaves a host of interesting questions with little more than suggestive leads.

Take the idea that certain beliefs have a taken-for-granted quality, providing them with an unchallenged hegemony. Further, that such hegemonic beliefs frequently serve to legitimize existing class and institutional relations. An important idea, no doubt, but to specify such an argument, by grounding it in a systematic, well constituted set of data has still to be accomplished. Anyone trying to do so would quickly uncover the vague and unspecified nature of much of the argument. This same lack of specification characterizes many of the most interesting theoretical arguments concerning the culture of politics. This, then, is my suggested addition to the agenda of the next decade -- another complementary stream to feed an already bubbling political sociology.

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