

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS HERE AND  
ELSEWHERE, NOW AND THEN

by  
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This paper was presented at Zaldfest, a conference held to recognize the contributions of Mayer Zald to the sociology of organizations, social movements, and culture, on 17-18 September 1999. It is one of ten papers that were presented at the conference:

- ◇ 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"
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**SOCIAL MOVEMENTS HERE AND ELSEWHERE,  
NOW AND THEN**

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**August 1999**

No social movements occurred in Kazakhstan this year. None occurred last year, and none will occur next year. Plenty of conflict, however, has occurred in Kazakhstan recently. Cossacks have been demanding more autonomy, Russians guarantees of their language and privileged positions, members of Kazakh hordes their rights to priority in their homeland, Muslims the Islamization of public life, and many contenders larger shares of graft or contraband. Since the inauguration of competitive elections in 1989, multiple parties have competed at the polls. Responding to reporters' questions about forthcoming parliamentary elections, president (and Soviet holdover) Nursultan Nazarbaev portrays himself as a democratic teacher:

Of course, when we have such economic hardships, political forces in the country become more active. For the first time in the history of Kazakhstan, there will be parliamentary elections by party lists. That is normal, but if the political struggle becomes more acute in the period to elections, I think I myself, as leader of the country, must educate my nation on how to introduce democracy to the country. We never had any sort of democracy before (Radio Free Europe 1999: 2).

In that education, schoolmaster Nazarbaev raps knuckles energetically. In preparation for the series of hastily scheduled national elections in question, which began yesterday (17 September), Nazarbaev arranged prosecution for tax evasion of former prime minister and likely rival Akezhan Kazhegeldin. Kazakh courts obligingly disqualified Kazhegeldin's candidacy for participating in an unsanctioned political meeting. Kazhegeldin left the country.

Human Rights Watch's 1999 Kazakhstan report recounted:

- 273 state violations of the country's own Law on the Press during 1997
- detention, prosecution, and disqualification of numerous opposition politicians in 1997 and 1998
- police beatings
- suppression of unsanctioned demonstrations, and
- numerous other state infringements of civil liberties

All occurred in the name of national security (Human Rights Watch 1999; see also CSCE 1998, Olcott 1997, United Nations 1995). Nazarbaev's own security forces deploy violence in virtual immunity from judicial control. Nothing much resembling a social movement goes on in Kazakhstan these days. Nor, for that matter, have the remaining fragments of the Soviet Union seen much of social movement activity since 1989 (Barrington 1995, Beissinger 1993, 1998a, 1998b, Drobizheva et al. 1996, Kaiser 1994, Khazanov 1995, Laitin 1998, 1999, McFaul 1997, Nahaylo & Swoboda 1990, Smith et al. 1998, Suny 1993, 1995).

I report this unsurprising news for three reasons. **First**, a decade or so ago many observers of communist regimes' last days thought that the destruction of centralized superstructures in those states would rapidly open the way to social movements, which would facilitate construction of a democratic civil society. Many of them followed an analogy with the market's expected transformation of economic activity. Neither the explosion of social movements nor the market transformation has happened (Nelson, Tilly & Walker 1998).

**Second**, by the enormously broad definitions of social movement proposed by Zald and McCarthy in their general statements - for example, "any sentiment and activity shared by two or more people oriented toward changes in social relations or the social system" (Zald & McCarthy 1987: 293-294) - my first point is wrong, since all social life consists of social movements. But Zald and McCarthy offer no theory that could possibly cover all such circumstances, and actually build their arguments around a historically circumscribed form of political interaction: in my terms, sustained challenges to authorities in the names of wronged entities by means of public, collective performances that demonstrate the worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment of advocates and their constituencies. In western history, the repertoires of social movements thus defined include public meetings, demonstrations, rallies, marches, creation of special-purpose associations, petition drives, written statements, interventions in electoral campaigns, lobbying, coupled with distinctive badges, costumes, symbols, slogans, and practices.

**Third**, Zald's 1984 prognosis for American social movements implicitly lays out a general theory of conditions that promote or inhibit social movements, in this narrower sense, as regular political events (Zald & McCarthy 1987, chapter 13). We can therefore reflect on his arguments in conjunction with non-American experiences on the way to assessing the validity of the Zald theory on its own

ground, setting appropriate limits to its application elsewhere or in other periods, and drawing inferences for the future of social movements both here - that is, in the United States - and elsewhere in the world.

Zald organizes his argument around likely continuities and changes in American social movements. Over the long term (which means since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century), he sees social movements as having moved away from questions of polity membership, toward involvement of experts and professionals, toward reliance on formal organizations, toward institutional separation from political parties, and toward pursuit of specific policy outcomes. Taking continuation of those trends as likely, he then speculates about how technological, demographic, and cultural changes will affect the character of social movements. His argument indirectly identifies these conditions for proliferation of social movements:

1. affluence
2. institutionalization of limited-purpose associations as coordinators of activity
3. multiplication of social change professionals, coupled with improvement of their technical skills
4. expansion of independent media having national audiences
5. differential distribution of problems across social cleavages

If this is the checklist, we might conclude that Kazakhstan has no social movements because it is too poor, its limited-purpose associations are too few, its social change professionals too inept, its media too controlled, its correspondence of problems with cleavages too weak. Is that enough to explain the difference between Kazakhstan and the United States? Do the five elements constitute sufficient conditions for the formation of social movements anywhere? I think not.

In trying to imagine what would promote the appearance of social movements as standard politics in today's post-socialist polities or their disappearance in today's capitalist polities, it helps to amplify Mayer's 1984 effort - to examine the historical conditions that promoted formation and expansion of social movements. In this hasty presentation, I can obviously do no more than sketch a line of analysis.

Social movements arise chiefly in democratizing and democratic regimes that feature fairly extensive means of registering popular preferences, voicing complaints, certifying legitimate political actors, and drawing dissident blocs into political coalitions. Where they operate, social movements do two sorts of political work. First, they press claims on authorities - claims for recognition, for redress, for protection, for pursuit of certain policies, and so on. Second, they assert **substance** on the part of claimants and their constituencies; they assert numbers, unity, worthiness, and commitment, which in turn entails the assertion that those who speak are valid interlocutors for the constituency.

The successful assertion of substance on the part of an unknown or previously inactive network of aggrieved persons constitutes a threat that members of the network will act effectively to disrupt existing political alliances, organizations, perquisites, and routines. That action can run from bloc voting to disruption of public proceedings to attacks on enemies. If effective, furthermore, such action will install new actors, actions, and identities in routine politics well beyond the moment of open contention. Backed by occasional demonstrations of readiness to upset established political decorum, the threat is often more effective than direct action over the long run.

Social movement politics depends on another kind of politics. It depends on the active presence of a relatively high capacity, relatively democratic state. It depends on the existence of citizenship, on a public politics that is partly insulated from existing categorical inequality, on some integration of interpersonal trust networks into public politics, and on governmental tolerance of collective claim making by a wide range of political actors (Tilly 1998, 1999a; 1999b). Because regimes creating just such a democratic politics have commonly adopted contested elections for public office, social movements twin with electoral politics, and often constitute a sort of para-electoral politics. In democratic contexts, as Mayer Zald and Jack Walker insisted long ago, interest group associations and social movement organizations overlap extensively, with the designation SMO applying more readily to associations that maintain contact with broad popular constituencies, whether of beneficiaries or of sympathizers. Many organizations alternate between social movement activity and interest group politics, or carry on both at the same time.

Several interesting conclusions follow.

- Zald is wrong to see a significant shift in American social movements from questions of polity membership to questions of public policy; every social movement asserts the existence of a polity member, of a voice that deserves recognition. Assertions of substance, furthermore, continue to matter greatly for activists who claim to speak for racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, women, clusters of immigrants, categories of sexual preference, abused children, exploited animals, threatened trees, or victims of far-off wars.
- Zald is nevertheless right to claim (as he does implicitly) that democratic polities institutionalize social movements and social movement organizations. Institutionalization means facilitating approved forms of political expression, channeling claimants into those forms, and repressing those that overflow prescribed channels.
- He is also right to single out affluence, institutionalization of limited-purpose associations, multiplication of social change professions, expansion of independent media, and differential distribution of problems across social cleavages as concomitants of social movement proliferation. But some of these occur in part as effects of social movement activity and of democratization in general.
- Hence his theory requires complementary theories of democratization, democratic politics, and state structure. It has little application outside of relatively democratic polities in high-capacity redistributive states.
- Social movements will proliferate elsewhere to the extent that high-capacity, redistributive, relatively democratic states emerge. Whether they adopt the same claim-making repertoire as North American and Western European social movements, however, depends both on their degree of contact with those movements and on the character of their domestic political institutions.
- They will disappear in the United States itself to the extent that our country moves away from a high-capacity, redistributive, relatively democratic state.

It is to Mayer Zald's credit, not his blame, that his creative lifetime of writing on social movements drives us back to fundamental questions of democratic theory.

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