

THE RATIONALIST URGE IN
SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS:
ZALD AS HISTORY

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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"
- ◇ 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"
- ◇ Yeheskel (Zeke) Hasenfeld, "Human Service Organizations and the Production of Moral Categories"
- ◇ John D. McCarthy, "Reinvigorating ZMRM: Zald/McCarthy Resource Mobilization"
- ◇ Doug McAdam, "Revisiting the U.S. Civil Rights Movement: Toward a More Synthetic Understanding of the Origins of Contention"

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September 13, 1999 The Rationalist Urge in Sociology and Social Movements: Zald as History.
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In this piece I wish to puzzle over the rationalistic Resource Mobilization work Zald did in the 1970's, and relate it to the rest of his work and to developments in sociology in general. The RM work did not fit too well with the rest of his work, but did fit well with sociology's drift, I will argue, so Zald's history is close to sociology's history. RM will refer specifically to the McCarthy and Zald work, distinguishing it from other structural interpretations of social movements, which were, like RM, opposed to the classical model that emphasized sentiments and spontaneity.

Zald is prolific, and any generalization about his output is bound to be contradicted by some piece or other, and I have only dipped in here and there in preparing this. But some rough generalizations can be made. From 1960 to the famous 1977 resource mobilization paper with John McCarthy there were about 20 classifiable journal or chapter publications by Zald. His dissertation came from a project comparing the organizational characteristics of juvenile reform schools, and thus eleven of the twenty pieces had internal organizational structure as their theme, and concerned service organizations of various kinds. This was bread and butter work, but very good. It reflected the concern with goals, power and structural contingencies in organizational analysis at that time. The second theme of this period, with four cites, is the relationship of organizations to society over time: social movement growth and decline, accrediting agencies, and the social control of hospitals. These pieces signal the change coming over organizational sociology; we were getting a hold on internal dynamics and wondered more about external factors.

But the analysis in both the 11 internal organizational pieces and the four organizations and society pieces is fairly functional, the propositions do not startle, there is a characteristic resort to taxonomy rather than identifying the drivers of the systems, and power is taken for granted rather than being explicitly explored. What distinguished these pieces is a theme of variability and complex interrelationships: movements fall as well as rise, and the reasons are not the obvious ones of success or exhaustion; they may succeed or fail independently of their growth and decline; boards of directors (unstudied till he came along) can be more powerful than is realized, but some are passive, lit up only by crises, if then, no simple generalizations hold; some reform schools see punishment as treatment, and the power of the treatment staff varies with internal structure, not just ideology or goals. In each case at least one commonplace and complacent generalization of economics, psychology or political science is revealed to be wrong, and we have instead variable outcomes from carefully specified conditions and complex interactions. The *explanation* of this variability does not always emerge, given the reliance upon taxonomies, but its existence, the "contingencies" of seemingly similar and stable institutions, is a powerful observation, and for those times, a novel one.

The third theme, with four cites, is less clear, but it is reaching for a grand scheme which he labels political economy. This partakes of the broad brush of the previous set, relating

organizations to society, but brings government and business in more explicitly, and has the social control emphasis that so preoccupied his mentor, Morris Janowitz. I think it is the most durable of his themes, and one he is now returning to, but it is not the one that made the most noise.

The noise came in 1977 (McCarthy and Zald 1977) with the striking and provocative formulation, with John McCarthy, of the emerging resource mobilization view, taking collective behavior out of the hands of the old guard and casting their lot in with the emerging rational choice preoccupations of the economists, who were discovering organizations. Much of it was there in a 1973 monograph (McCarthy and Zald 1973), emphasizing the professional entrepreneurial cadre, a small or non-existent membership base, outside resources, and the defining and manipulating of grievances, but the tighter article in 1977 is the one most referenced. Mayer tells me that during his Career Development grant from NIMH, from 1967 to 1972, he studied economics and law, in order to pursue the social control theme. In this effort he picked up the vocabulary and concepts of economists, such as sector, industry, and entrepreneur, became alert to the sources of capital, and was struck by Mancur Olsen's version of Kenneth Arrow's impossibility theorem: without selective incentives, movements will not succeed because of the free rider problem. This was striking, since organizational theory had not confronted the self-interest issue head-on, gloried in institutional rather than rational actors, and since it was just climbing out of the factory foreman's alcove or the board room, as yet had only a limited sense of sector, industry and capital dependence.

What was most striking, though, for me was the incipient theme of rational choice in the 73 and 77 pieces. What I have called, apparently borrowing it unnoticed from Granovetter, the "invasion of the body snatchers," slipping quietly into the sociological cottage, dates from this decade. Here economists abandon the organization as a black box notion and substitute contracts, with hard-wired, self-interest maximizing, cost and benefit calculators. (It is ironic that our sainted messenger of embeddedness, Mark Granovetter, was in 1978, a year after the iconic McCarthy and Zald piece, pursuing an even more pure rational choice view of social movements. It must have been in the air, as we say. See the very useful review of the field by Morris and Herring for a discussion of Granovetter's forgotten apostasy, and much else. (Morris and Herring 198?)) There was a real need for a more structural approach to collective behavior at this time, though no apparent one for a rational choice view of structure. The social psychologists' Human Relations tradition in organizational theory – we are meeting in its heartland at this instant – was almost as bad as the classical social movement theorists' heavy emphasis upon sentiments, spontaneity, and hearts and minds. In both traditions leadership and voluntarism ruled and structure and environment were distant constraints. But in remaking social movement theory there were other alternatives to the economist's entrepreneur calculating the way the rich can be induced to help those they have just impoverished, or the powerful to empower those they have rendered powerless. James Jasper, in his neglected and windy but very important book length appeal to the moral and the sentiments in movements, called "The Art of Moral Protest," identifies 4 social movement traditions, and puts the McCarthy and Zald one in with other structural ones (Tilly, Obershall, Gamson, Jenkins). (Jasper 1997) But I want to pull them out of this category and link them more sharply with the rationality of the economist's rational choice model. Much later, by 1992, Zald was incorporating some political process

variables that rubbed with irritation the rat choice view, ((Zald 1992) and see also (McAdam, McCarthy et al. 1996)) but it is rat choice that what gave Zald and McCarthy their edge, and it reverberated with the emerging emphasis upon rational choice in the work of Coleman, Hecter, and others in sociology (not to mention the sociologists that migrated to the B schools).

After the 1977 piece up to the present we find 8 cites of articles in Zald's bibliography concerned with developing and defending the Resource Mobilization, or RM work; it clearly took off. But the political economy and social control theme expands, though only in article form; there are seven cites. I find this theme intriguing, since it conceptualizes systems rather than organizations, and deals with unobtrusive as well as direct controls, and is historically bracketed. However, its propositional format seems unproductive with such broad generalizations as we find there, and the smooth flow of sometimes obvious hypotheses masks contradictions and inconsistencies. But the field of organizational theory was moving in this macro direction, and Zald and his collaborators did much to hurry it along. The resource dependency theme of Pfeffer and Salancik popped up in this period, alerting us to competitors and regulators, and much later, in the fascinating work on industry change by Tushman, with creative destruction, a la Schumpeter. But it is all there in Zald's work on the social control of industry. Zald has always been someone to mine.

A final theme, with six cites, emerges after 1977 from this prolific source, with two related branches: first, a historical view of organizations, a view largely untouched since Weber, except by Bendix, and thus a real frontier, and second, the relationship between the humanities concerns and qualities, and those of sociology and the social sciences, including non other than a critique of rational choice theories. That work is still evolving and I can't characterize it as yet. The articles dedicated to internal organizational practices drop out of his bibliography entirely, though of course a chunk of the RM literature turns on the strategic choices of movement entrepreneurs, and thus is internal.

What intrigues me about this intellectual journey is how it tries to transcend the sociological field in three diverse, even contrary ways. The RM work was one of the first signs that sociology was embarrassed by its do-good and leftist concern for the impoverished and powerless. Our great chance with The Great Society and the War on Poverty was fizzling away. What better way to respond to the taunts of the economists and the increasingly rational choice political scientists than to take one of traditional sociology's finest showcases, the insurgency of blacks, minorities, women, students, welfare recipients and so on, and subject it to a rational choice analysis, where sentiments did not matter and grievances were a constant and thus irrelevant, and where sociology's classic beacons, class and power, were dimmed by the resources that mobilized organizations could summon from benign elites and institutions. While to my knowledge the economists have not found the area of social movements significant enough to invade, in 1977 the body snatchers were about to invade most other areas, especially organizational behavior, rendering the subjects lifeless. But they did not have to invade in the movement area; as a citation search by Morris and Herring shows, RM did it for them; it swept the next generation, particularly the McCarthy and Zald formulation. The next generation embraced a good bit of the rational choice paradigm that stood erect in the work of McCarthy and

Zald, Colemanizing the field. Much the same process was going on elsewhere in sociology, though certainly not everywhere.

Matched against either LeBon, or the hearts and minds approach, there is no doubt that RM is superior. It is organizational and interorganizational. But that is easy. Why, I wonder, did not a few other alternatives to hearts and minds and LeBon command more attention, rather than the rational choice, costs and benefits one? For example, the key role of elites and the state, as found in the work of Tilly and of Jenkins; of how resources tumble in after, not before, protests (Jenkins and Eckert, 1986); and the unobtrusive control techniques of both elites and protesters so well explained by cognitive psychology and sociological framing and scripts? These views simply stayed in the second and third class carriages. I think social movement theory was caught in the juncture that much of sociology was in the late 70's: should we take a cultural turn, since myths and symbols and ideologies were our trademark; should we take a rational turn, where we could have mathematical models and simple assumptions of self interests without the garbage of culture; or should we look towards the larger structures of class interest, power, capitalism and the state, as in the Gamson, Tilly, McAdam, and Oberschall work on the political process model in social movements? For sociology as a whole the first two came to dominate – the cultural turn, and separately, the rational choice turn; the structural is a poor third.

To his credit, Zald has explored all three, with the RM work emphasizing rational choice, the work on political economy emphasizing the larger structures of interests, and his more recent foray into history and the humanities constituting a cultural turn of sorts. His work on social movements is broad and he has no quarrel with Gamson, Tilly and so on. But it is not a case of integrating diverse perspectives; I feel he kept them rather separate, turning from one to another, and where there is a conscious integration effort, as in his essay with Doug McAdam and John McCarthy in 1996, it strikes me as programmatic cobbling rather than integration. (McAdam, McCarthy et al. 1996) In any event, it is what is picked up and used that interests me, and it is what interested McCarthy and Zald too when they conclude a 1987 piece, 10 years after the key one, by saying their most important point is their rejection of a “bleeding-heart liberal” analysis and the introduction of rational choice and movement entrepreneurs. But the corpse of the traditional model had been mercifully dead since the late-1960's, twenty years before, as new structural views were emerging; the rational choice infusion threatened to substitute a robot for the sociology of political action.

Of course I exaggerate. They are critical of a bald rational choice position. McCarthy and Zald attempt to sociologically reframe the dilemma Olson found with his discussion of how free riders make collective action problematical unless there are selective benefits, but it is a modest sociological whitewash. (Olson 1963) First, they agree with Olson that selective incentives help and offer examples in the movements, but characteristically note that these must be hidden from the conscience constituency lest they derail moral credibility. But why is that? One could have both incentives and morality. Second, McCarthy and Zald do more than use selective incentives even if they must be disbursed; they also say individual self interests don't matter in the way that Olson poses: individual citizen participation may be unimportant to movement vitality because of the mobilization of outside resources. The economist Olson characteristically looked only to internal resources, where there could be a collective action problem; outside institutions, including

government, and sentiments in the larger society, provided resources for mobilization that a more sociological analysis would spot. But Olson would not be offended; his argument was about mobilizing resources, and broadening the frame does not question the primacy of rational choice. A more telling criticism of the rational choice paradigm in this area comes from Jasper's observation that selective incentives are not inconsistent with the satisfactions of moral engagement; indeed, they provide the occasion for moral expressions of protest, which are more important than the selective incentives; selective incentives are not destructive of moral concerns. (Jasper 1997 p23 - 33) Only rational choicers would sunder the connection and dismiss the moral.

There have been many criticisms of the RM formulation, but one problem in particular could not come to light for some decades, and it is important because Zald's political economy and his historical and cultural work could address it. I don't think it has, as yet, and that puzzles me. RM theory links protest with abundant resources such as disposable income, company profits, a large number of students with flexible time on their hands, and a growing class of movement professionals able to extract resources from elites and the affluent middle class. All of these conditions have expanded since the early 1980's, but *the number of significant social movements has not*. The conditions required for movements by the RM formulation still exist and have expanded, but the movements don't. Something must be missing.

I have to be careful here because counting movements is just as contentious as being French. Many in the field argue there is a proliferation of national and local social movement organizations, and that we even have a "social movement society." (Minkoff 1997) They point to the animal rights movement, a variety of environmental and ecology groups, various issues on the agenda of the Christian Right, including pro-lifers, and there are pro-choice, anti-gun groups, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, and a variety of symbolic so-called "identity communities," linked only by the U.S. Post office or the Internet. Clearly we are still a nation of joiners, as de Toqueville described us nearly two centuries ago. But I would argue that what is important, and needs explaining, is the decline of *disorderly protest groups that quickly appeared in a variety of localities, requiring some risk and considerable effort on the part of their members*. It is not difficult to explain advocacy and interest groups and even isolated disorderly fringe groups. If that is all RM theorists aspired to explain we might let them have them. But they went after the big disorderly protest groups that took risks, such as the peace movements and a variety of civil rights movements.

Only a few of the movements of the 60's and 70's went into successful retirement. The Vietnam war was finally ended, and protest did play an important role there I believe, and the motivation for protest went far beyond avoiding the draft. But subsequent military adventures in Guatemala, Panama, Beirut, Hati, Somalia, Iraq, Bosnia and Kosovol have had little social movement opposition even though they have been strongly criticized, with ample motivation for protest present. Quiet political work of a traditional sort infuses the quite successful anti-personnel land mine work, not a social movement. The anti-nuclear weapons and anti-nuclear power movements disappeared as the cold war wound down and TMI blocked new power stations, but in neither case is it clear that the movements had that much to do with the demise of the weapons and plants; the target for the movements just faded. But that explanation is not available with RM theory.

With regard to the issues of poverty, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender there is still a great deal to be done; none of the movements that were in these areas can argue that they wound down because of success. And RM tells us that the grievances you will always have with you; indeed, that objective conditions will not explain social movements. So prosperity, a sure source of resources, should not dampen the movements; indeed, it should have expanded them. I will pause a moment over the poverty and race issues, just to indicate why I am surprised that these fronts are so quiet.

Though the percent below the poverty level has dropped sharply, the poverty of the truly poor has increased. High incarceration rates help keep unemployment low. The life span of Black American males is shrinking and the proportion of Afro-American males with court convictions continues to rise. In society as a whole, everyone knows there has been a redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top, or at least that the large increase in wealth has gone primarily to the top. And this is not a benign Pareto optimum, wherein while some benefit a lot, no one is worse off. As the rich get richer, the living standard of the poor suffers absolutely even if income remains the same. Rents go up and taxes go up with the gentrification the poor cannot afford, products come with unneeded frills that raise their prices, cheap foods disappear from the markets, public transportation declines in coverage, reliability, and schedules, and the government spends millions on research to improve the life style of rich elders but little on TB. Poor people are worse off with the same money when the rich get richer.

We need reminding just how big a grievance many might hold, but either don't act on it, or can't act on it. Here are a few:

- * Microsoft CEO Bill Gates owns more wealth than the bottom 45 percent of American households combined. (That's because so many have negative net worth.)
- * Most households have lower net worth, adjusting for inflation, than they did in 1983, when the Dow was still at 1,000.
- * Since the mid-1970s, the top 1 percent of households have doubled their share of the national wealth.
- * In 1865, when most African Americans were slaves, they owned 0.5 percent of total worth of the US. By 1990, 135 years later, they owned 1 percent of wealth.

Progress on the feminist front has been more substantial than any of the other groups that formed protest movements, but the area still holds some very serious grievances. Stonewall and Act Up were effective for gay men, and this is the only other area with substantial gains. We can ignore the few gains made by the welfare rights movement in the 70's; Clinton's reform of welfare did away with these and much more. The pro choice movement is on the defensive and losing political ground, though pharmaceuticals such as the French pill may make the issue moot. The anti choice movement would be labeled as a social movement by RM, I am sure, but I see it more as a religious interest group organized by large, stable and powerful churches, including the Catholic Church, with only a fringe of fanatics that give it some of the disorderly protest and spontaneity of a 60's movement. As Jasper notes, structural theories were constructed on the basis of citizenship movements – labor and civil rights – where obvious repression is ever present. (37-39) Repression is not the issue in animal rights and nuclear power protests.

Judging from a 1987 piece on “The Future of Social Movements” Zald is willing to define as social movements such things as the hospice movement, the regulation of truck weights, the woman’s movement’s position on defense policy and its anti-nuclear weapons stance, and the activities of environmental groups. (McCarthy and Zald 1987) I suppose these are still with us, but the activities strike me as those of interest groups rather than social movements, and if they are the latter they fall in the excluded category of moral protest. Closer to what I think of as true movements are the fringe of the anti-abortion interest groups that engage in disorderly politics (not to mention murder) and Act Up, which was briefly a movement but with some successes it has not mobilized in some time. Some trade union interests have occasionally had a movement flavor, such as Justice for Janitors and graduate student sit-ins. But all these constitute pretty slim pickings for those who would argue that social movements are alive and well. Of course they have “changed,” but so much, I think, that a term such as “voluntary social action” is more appropriate than “movements.”

If social movements as traditionally defined have declined sharply, why? Since they were supposedly not caused by deprivations in the first place, since there are always deprivations, as RM forcefully told us (and as I and Jenkins once stated), there must be some unmeasured variable about that would explain our comparative quiescence. It could be outright repression – shooting 8 or 10 Panther leaders in the back or in their beds in the late 1960's was very effective, and sent a decisive message, but that was an extreme case. It could be harassment, I suppose, but I don’t give elites that much credit for such widespread suppression. Perhaps the entrepreneurs have all migrated to bio-tech and software firms, to the proliferating NGOs, or been bought out by conservative think tanks. The affluence and leisure and the students are still all there. I was never really very active in the 60's, but was gassed enough to feel despair at making any big changes, so I can be sympathetic to the idea that the 60's activists are burnt out. But 30 years have gone by since Johnson and Nixon cracked down; a couple of good generations should be in there with ideals and energy. They did not appear, and the attitude surveys of incoming freshmen showed no grievances that would point towards social movements; in the 80's they decisively went with Reagan and the rational choice economists into the free market..

Maybe the free market presents so many opportunities to entrepreneurs that no moral entrepreneurs now exist. That at least would be consistent with RM. Their interpretation gives one the sense that the moral entrepreneurs of the 60's couldn’t find an honest job in the for profit market, and thus were reduced to working the nonprofits. Remember, sentiment is out and ideology is something to be marketed. Now there may be no need to found, build or work for *risky radical* nonprofits.

That leaves the foundations and the big donor businesses. It is not clear from the RM literature what their motives were when they supported the movements.. They could have been shamed sufficiently so that they contributed to Martin Luther King or the Blackstone Rangers, which would bring it into line with the analysis of the media’s key role in publicizing some injustices. Zald says someplace that the new ivy league lawyers were demanding a day of pro bono work a week. The ivy leaguers are in such demand now they could get two days, but they don’t ask for any. Why the change?

The notion of a movement “industry” might help us; we could say the public no longer

wanted the product of the industry so it died. Fair enough, but why the upsurge in demand in the middle 50's and the decline by the end of the 70's? New technologies and competition, a la Tushman won't help us I think; political goods appear to differ from consumer and military goods. We could look for conjunctural events, as in Zald's essay on "History, Meta-Narratives, and Organizational Theory" (Zald 1998) but the obvious ones of demand satiation and disappearing resources won't help us because the first is not allowed and the second has not occurred. The most consistent with RM is still the migration of entrepreneurs to other areas. Nor does a path dependent argument say much, unless we introduce repression. Mimicry, a favorite of neoinstitutionalists, does not help; Minkoff well shows how movements affected one another when they were about, but we don't know why they are no longer about. (Minkoff 1997) Her notion that they have moved off into service and interest group non profits and NGO's, creating the social capital so many find evaporating, makes sense, (Minkoff 1997) but I think the grievances demanding *some* movements still exist.

As Minkoff says in a personal correspondence, "Even if resources are widely available, political conditions are more determinant with respect to deploying them for collective action." Along these lines, I rather like a notion that says that elite fissures were sealed, deliberately or adventitiously, and thus the notions that Jenkins and I once advanced long ago, drawing upon Tilly, become crucial – there has to be an opening at the top. (Jenkins and Perrow 1977) One can also lay out a script about the power of television and advertising to force the consumerization of America, rather than its Greening, thus turning aside insurgency and solidifying in the public the elites' embrace of individualism and free markets. The convergence of the two major parties around social issues, with only the Christian Right in protest about marginal life-style issues, could argue for the lack of insurgency resources and the difficulty of framing the issues of poverty and injustice. Certainly sociology would have helped such a convergence, with its attainment view of stratification, focusing upon education and occupation rather than wealth and power. It could be said to have contributed to what Zald identifies as epochs, or stable accommodations of forces which produce regime structures, which will in a few decades be destabilized for a short period of turmoil, followed by a new epoch and regime structure. Vague as it is, it is better than the discrete and ahistorical resource factors that drive the RM formulation. Surprisingly, though, his 1995 political economy piece neatly lays out almost everything, including the epochs notion, but ignores social movements. (Zald 1998) I expected to find variables or propositions in his political economy, historical and humanities work that would deal with the field he is best known for, and explain the dumbing down of movement goals, but I did not. Will RM drop out of his bibliography over the next decade, as the internal structure of service organizations did after 1977? I hope not. We have to remember that it was Zald who brought organizational analysis into the social movement sector; this was a stunning contribution. The absence of much mobilization now is of more pressing concern to me than explaining the past mobilization, but explaining that absence will have to include organizations as well as political economy, so I look to him for the explanations.