

Social Movements, Protest, and Contention

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THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT RESEARCH

**Dynamics, Mechanisms,
and Processes**

**Jacquelen van Stekelenburg,
Conny Roggeband, and
Bert Klandermans, editors**

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Discussion: Meaning and Movements in the New Millennium: Gendering Democracy

Myra Marx Ferree

With so many dimensions to the changes in the terrain of political contention today, it is hardly surprising that each essay in part IV identifies these central challenges differently. Yet all focus fairly narrowly on material conditions and organizational actors. Della Porta (chapter 17) argues that state institutions, and thus mobilizations, are eclipsed by transnational ones that address the seat of real power, in her view. McCarthy, Rafail, and Gromis (chapter 18) see the terrain as shifting down rather than up, with national institutions less targeted than local ones in the United States, because American domestic politics has transferred power to the individual states. Mayer (chapter 19) stresses the extent to which change in level depends on context: France has a strong national social movement tradition that is regularly evoked for mobilizations, especially by labor. McAdam and Tarrow (chapter 16) address the relationship between national state institutions and proclivity to mobilize by showing how contending political parties within national party systems operate variously as partners for and alternatives to social movement organizing.

These essays indicate that a major part of what alters movement dynamics is the changes in states and what they do, as Koopmans suggests in his introduction to part IV (chapter 15). Unquestionably, shifts in power between states and transnational economic actors like the World Bank, CitiBank, and Toyota matter; so do regional shifts of political power such as supranational policy integration by the European Union (EU) and the ascendancy of states' rights in the United States. Politics responds to such institutional shifts, as governments, parties, and movements all compete for power in a context in which the stakes are high, the rules are uncertain, and alliances are in flux.

Still, the general principle seems stable: follow the money. The flows of money and thus power are changing, all authors agree, reconfiguring the material terrain of opportunity.

The essays also emphasize that macrolevel strategic situations affect both sides of any struggle. Rises in corporate power combined with declines in corporate accountability make banks and transnational corporations targets of global justice movements, as della Porta shows, while corporate funding of parties (both Democratic and Republican) explains some of the shift to the right in U.S. politics since the 1980s, including the increase in surveillance and repression directed at protest mobilizations on the left, as McCarthy, Rafail, and Gromis note. Party structures, and their potential funders and allies, also respond to movement mobilizations, as McAdam and Tarrow emphasize. Indeed, the EU's control over currency may affect the national strategic situations for Greek, French, and other European mobilizations more similarly than Mayer's comparison of different cultures of contention suggests.

Still, political culture matters. The "Frenchness" of the French includes a willingness to resist state actions that impoverish ordinary citizens, an attitude toward the welfare state that European social movements have cultivated over generations. Conversely, U.S. right-leaning movements, from the John Birch Society in the 1950s to Focus on the Family in the 1990s to the Tea Party in the 2010s, have cultivated an attitude of anxiety about the welfare state. The perception—constructed over time by movement framers—that the EU is itself a unitary, neoliberal actor helps to mobilize national resistance movements in many contexts at various times: in Denmark in the accession process; in Ireland, in rejecting the proposed constitution; in Greece about the euro; in Poland about gender equality directives. The single-minded focus on institutions, whether economic or political, as shaping the context for mobilizations leaves out the discursive frames that give meaning to politics. This essay attempts to bring meaning back in.

The Politics of Discourse

Issue framing, along with institutional situations, defines the terrain on which movement mobilizations take place. I define *framing* as an interaction in which actors with agendas meet discursive opportunities as structured in institutionally authoritative texts. Frames that resonate with particular populations pick up and adapt ideas that are part of their (still predominantly national) discursive frameworks. Movements on the left and right do discursive politics with the cultural tools available to them in that time and place. They are not the only actors with agendas. As della Porta argues, institutional actors promote a minimalist and procedural conception of democracy that

is challenged by movements pressing for a broader inclusion of issues and voices. How democracy works depends to a large degree on what democracy is framed as *meaning*, both in terms of the specific institutional arrangements that texts authorize and the disputed frames that are in play.

Unlike the other authors in part IV, I suggest that the changing terrain of movements today may have less to do with the scale or locus of material power than with the unresolved issues of democracy raised by movements of the past, especially, but not only, the position of women as citizens. The institutionalization of procedural democracy went hand in hand with the exclusion from institutional access to politics of certain kinds of issues and constituents in specific ways in different countries. Universal suffrage was not part of the American Revolution, for example, but needed a civil war, a women's suffrage movement, and an African American civil rights movement to include the majority of the U.S. population. Exclusion remains an issue: some portions of U.S.-controlled territory (the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico) have limited access to formal democracy, and new voter identification measures threaten to reexclude challenger groups.

In other words, democracy itself remains a contested term. The struggle over what democracy means is not limited to states that are losing openly autocratic regimes, such as Egypt and Libya, but is overt in places such as Wisconsin and Ohio (where it particularly involves the right to collective bargaining), New Hampshire and Indiana (where disenfranchisement is at issue), and Greece and Germany (where national financial commitments to the EU are seen as undemocratic as well as costly). Whether these movements succeed in shifting the meaning of democracy remains to be seen, but the tension between a view of democracy as institutional, representative, and achieved and a framing of democracy as participatory, discursive, and aspirational is still very relevant.

Redefinitions of democracy reform institutional arrangements, but they also transform the substance of political struggles. When politics is defined through exclusions built on race, gender, sexuality, and national identity, there are different forces aroused than when politics is defined merely by reference to partisan competition or economic resistance to corporate globalization. Although democracy is defined as the power of people, the question still arises, which people?

The terrain of contentious politics shifts when conflicts focus on political issues framed in ways that offer opportunity for new collective identities to emerge. Adams and Padamsee (2001) discuss this in terms of the "signs" that regimes use to invoke various "subject positions," speaking to people in terms of their religions, genders, racialized communities, family values, or other potential identities. To illustrate, consider McAdam and Tarrow's story

of how electoral activity is intertwined with movement mobilizations. They stress the parties and movements as actors; the discursive model looks instead at systems and values.

In the case of U.S. civil rights mobilization, the nature of the electoral system was itself at issue. As the links among movements, parties, congressional debate, and social policy were profoundly transformed, the “solid South” shifted from alignment with the Democrats to Republicans electorally, without changing its states’ rights discourse, a resonant framing about whiteness and power. Republicans could appeal to portions of the white electorate with racially coded social issue campaigns (including the War on Drugs and welfare reform) without fear of electoral consequences from black voters. This reframing of U.S. politics, which Bonilla-Silva (2003) calls “racism without racists,” also produced changes in voting districts, electoral laws, and taxation that restructured the institutional terrain, including where money flowed. Movements and parties are not just related to each other; both are sited in a broader field of political discourse.

Similarly, the deparliamentarization of politics in Europe reflects not only shifts in the locus of corporate power vis-à-vis the state but also changing definitions of what politics is supposed to be about. As the classic left-right alignment of political conflict in European welfare states was disrupted by “new” movements, space opened for contestations over precisely those issues on which left and right had agreed. As the voluminous literature on new social movements shows, the issues of environmental destruction, inadequate investment in higher education, and the exclusion and devaluation of women citizens challenged an institutional political system that defined such concerns as “not political.”

Feminism and the Changing Framework of the Political

This reframing of democracy in the 1960s and 1970s changed the relationship between institutions and formerly marginalized populations. This is especially evident in the transformation of global norms to encompass women’s citizenship more fully. Feminism—the revolutionary demand for women’s autonomy, gender equality, and political solidarity among women (a radical extension of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*)—has now become a discursive framework with institutional anchors creating resonance for a variety of claims (Liu 2006; Jenson 2008). Women’s interests were reframed from being apolitical needs to being politically charged demands. Political systems—from conservative parties to leftist movements—were challenged as antidemocratic because they offered no formal avenues for including these concerns in the institutionalized framework of “politics.”

Changes ensued as women became visible as citizens and voters. In Germany, for example, the politics of feminism flowed into movement organizations and new political parties such as the GREENS but also transformed old parties such as the German Christian Democrats (CDU) and the Social Democrats (SPD). The SPD, long beholden to the unions, dropped its long-standing objections to part-time work and longer shopping hours; the CDU, which had long seen itself as reliant on women’s votes, modernized its family-friendly image by invoking women’s rights discourse in restructuring parental leave policy (Von Wahl 2006; Wiliarty 2010).

German feminists speak of “gender democracy,” meaning the equal sharing of political power by women and men and women’s empowerment to raise issues of gender justice (Ferree 2012). This is a challenge to both the *gender of governance*, the sex composition of decision makers, and the *governance of gender*, state policies that subordinate women (Brush 2003). Understanding gender relations as being about democracy is a global phenomenon, expressed variously in different local and regional strategic situations. The variety of outcomes of these struggles highlights how pervasive the reframing of gender as a contestable political issue has become (Friedman 2009).

Claims about human rights are a global discourse of immense power for bringing democracies into existence, empowering specific groups, and setting limits on what concerns are legitimate (Markovitz and Tice 2002; Maddison and Jung 2008). Across Europe, gender and democracy are connected in policy challenges to the public-private divide, such as quotas for women in political offices and “daddy days” for men to provide child care at home (Hobson and Fahlen 2009), but also in the repression of Muslims in the name of defending gender equality as a democratic value (Korteweg and Yurdakul 2009). The discourses of European welfare states are open to both types of challenges, supporting active state intervention against socioeconomic inequality and recognizing the state as having religion, in ways the United States does not.

Within the framework of “women’s rights are human rights,” women are still struggling to realize full citizenship. The strategic situations they confront include Central American democracies (particularly Nicaragua and El Salvador), where left parties returned to power through alliance with the Roman Catholic Church and in return introduced both generous state investments in education, health care, and nutrition and draconian penalties for women suspected of abortion (Heumann 2010; Viterna 2011). These states imprison women who miscarry but turn a blind eye to incest, domestic violence, and rape, yet these left-leaning, Catholic-supported governments are not subject to the transnational scrutiny directed at Islamic-supported governments in Turkey or Indonesia, nor does their credibility as leftist seem impaired. So the

question of whether democracy actually includes women's citizenship remains part of the unsettled discursive terrain of politics.

The political salience of women's rights and women's bodies indicates a larger shift in terrain for movement mobilization, one Foucault called "biopower": the governance of life itself, with political debates being framed as being about the regulation of birthrates, immigration, sexualities, pensions, nutrition, and health care. Issues of surveillance and demands for self-discipline, two aspects of such governance, follow from biopower debates and make claims for freedom resonate even within formal democracies. Issues where bodies and their management are central are not easily aligned on the classic left-right dimension, as movements and states struggle over the parameters of privacy, security, and sexual autonomy for both women and men. The personal domain, long identified with women, is now incontrovertibly political for both women and men, whether current local contestations are about food or sex, keeping secrets or giving care.

It is not trivial that Western states have changed their understanding of politics to include women. Women holding public office are not now radically disruptive, even when they are as powerful as Angela Merkel or Hillary Clinton, but the discursive terrain for criteria has widened. Politics appears less than democratic when more than 60 percent of the decision makers are men. Parties, legislatures, and executives, and even courts, are increasingly vulnerable to a perception of illegitimacy if they fail to be "inclusive." The institutional norm of gender equality in the public sphere is hard for even relatively conservative parties to challenge. Yet the discursive terrain in the domain defined as "private" tilts more toward "family" than gender equality. Indeed, U.S. family-value activists have been influential globally in seeding and supporting antiabortion campaigns in Latin America, antihomosexuality campaigns in Africa, and anti-birth control campaigns in the United Nations (Buss and Herman 2003; Hassett 2007; Heumann 2010).

The larger strategic situation that this creates for contentious politics in the twenty-first century is one in which the discursive framework of the Cold War has been replaced by a "clash of civilizations" (Huntington 1992). In both conflicts, the norm of gender equality helps define a dichotomous discursive field. In the Cold War, the East claimed the achievement of women's emancipation as its own, while the West embraced religious authority, patriarchal families, and legal repression of homosexuality as counters to the threat of "godless communism" (Moeller 1993). In the postsocialist era, a new polarity with discursive mobilization potential was discovered. In the so-called War on Terror, Western countries congratulate themselves on achieving women's liberation and castigate the Islamic East for being religious, patriarchal, and

antigay. The continuing inequality of women in the West is obscured by pointing East and framing Islam and Middle Eastern states as the oppressors of women, just as the continuing inequality of women in communist states was formerly obscured by their governments during the Cold War. Although the polarities have reversed, the broad discursive battle between East and West over appropriate domestic gender relations remains. This terrain, not merely a material shift in power among levels and types of institutional actors, shapes present and future movement outcomes.

Conclusion: Using Feminist Experience to Reframe Political Terrain

A focus on the discursive context for movement mobilizations as a significant, locally variable, and geopolitically shifting terrain also reconstructs the meaning of radical and reformist politics. Because feminists (as well as other challengers to biopower such as disability activists, gay rights groups, and environmentalists) have taken movement claims quickly from the streets to the executive levels of government, the question of how movement success actually transforms societies arises. Perhaps deeply transformative—radical—changes need not be associated with large or long-lasting protest demonstrations. Institutional blockages may force challengers onto the streets, but global-level shifts in discursive opportunity at specific historical moments (such as the inversion of Cold War gender politics in the War on Terror) may also open doors to radical change. The diffusion of antiauthoritarian movements in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and, most recently, the Middle East and North Africa suggests that geopolitical flows of ideas and inspiration shape the terrain for movement mobilizations and confront specific national conditions that shape developments in particular countries. Truly radical transformations may come from the intersection of discursive with material institutional opportunities at the transnational, national, and local levels.

Even so-called radicals may prefer reform strategies when discursive as well as material blockages fade and shifts in discourse open up opportunities to use more conventional tools. As once with working-class men, feminists now have become insiders in parties of various hues worldwide. This "NGO-ization" of the women's movement shifts the reasons, repertoires, and resources for feminist struggles, with outcomes that are quite diverse in how states respond (Lang 1997; Liu 2006; Maddison and Jung 2008). For example, the technocratic expertise in women's networks becomes a tool in competitions among states to show statistically that they are achieving gender equality (Markovitz and Tice 2002). Such competitions are set off by global policy norms institutionalized in everything from the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations to the parental leave and part-time parity measures of the EU and

are actualized by the “audit culture” of global governance through measured outcomes (Power 1994).

State pledges to embrace gender mainstreaming as a tool and gender equality as an objective may be hollow unless external activists hold states accountable (Woodward 2004), but the fact that states self-define as accepting norms of gender equality is still an important achievement of feminism and continuing political opportunity (Ramirez 2012). Feminist movements have become creative in finding ways to hold national governments accountable. Their networks of mobilization mix movement and state resources into tools usable at multiple scales. For example, impoverished, undocumented women immigrants claimed domestic violence as grounds for asylum in Canada; women’s groups then mobilized to modify national refugee rights and subsequently succeeded in bringing gender-based violence into international treaties (Alfredson 2008). The porousness of states to transnational discourses is matched by activists’ abilities to use the resources of the national state to shift transnational norms, procedures, and legal regulations. Kathrin Zippel (2004) points to the “ping-pong effect” between member states and the EU as feminist activists turn back and forth to spur action where it is lagging.

In sum, feminist experience shows that the future of social movement research is not well conceptualized only as a shift in institutional opportunity structures—whether in state–society relationships, such as states downloading, offloading, or laterally shifting power to others, or within states, by centralization of authority in the executive, or in the growing power of corporate interests at national or transnational scales. The dynamics of contention are discursive as well as institutional, and movements themselves matter in changing discourses. A particularly important change is in the meaning of democracy to include formerly disempowered groups and contentious struggles over concerns that have been formerly defined as private and apolitical.

Movements, however, are not the only sources of discursive change. Global polarizations and national interests in legitimacy steer states’ embrace of particular discourses. The rapid reversal of polarity on gender, sexuality, family, and religion between West and East is an indication of how the strategic situation facing movements is reshaped by discourses outside their individual control. State interests drive discursive transformations in nationally and regionally specific directions, too. EU gender policies seen as serving European integration are on a different track than those of the United States, which are hostage to “American exceptionalism.” Within Europe, the sense that gender is part of the “EU agenda” means national feminist mobilizations have not moved at the same speed or even in the same direction.

Although feminist challenges to the meaning of democracy illustrate how

frameworks of discourse are both elements of opportunity and also malleable objects of political struggle, gender politics is by no means the only case in which meaning matters. The successes of feminist movements have won more public, political space for women but have also changed the dynamics of contention for all movements, making gender issues intertwine with other claims and conflicts. Not only because of neoliberalism and its consequences in shifting opportunities for holding and exercising material power but also because of biopower and its claims on human values, such discursive understandings of democracy constitute important parts of the terrain on which the struggles among states, movements, and transnational actors will be fought in the decades ahead.

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Afterword

Bert Klandermans

Have the dynamics of contention changed? This is the question that the social movement scholars who contributed to this volume were asked. The easy answer is that we don't know, as we haven't done the proper longitudinal research. At the same time, it is hard to believe that the dynamics of contention have not changed. Over the past years, the world has seemed in constant turmoil, whether we look at China, the Arab world, the African continent, Latin America, Central Europe, or the Western world. Our "all-star team," including "some of [today's] most influential scholars in the field" (to cite our two external reviewers), was asked not only to reflect on our focal question but also to respond to each other's answers. The result is a rich compendium of answered and unanswered questions, of challenges and provoking thoughts, and of directions recommended to take.

Reading through the various contributions, I made the final notes that I present in this afterword. I arrange them according to the four concepts that framed the discussion: demand, supply, mobilization, and context. However, I want to start with a comment about dynamics per se. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) first started discussion about dynamics and mechanisms, as explained in the introduction by Jacqueliën van Stekelenburg and Conny Roggeband. I second McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly's argument that we must think more in terms of dynamics, mechanisms, and processes. Understanding movement activities, whether contentious or not, is about understanding the processes that generate these activities. This is important as movement activities are the visible aspects of movements. Seeking to understand the dynamics that produce those activities and their consequences is what the study of social movements is all about.