

Book Review

Sociology

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David S Meyer

How Social Movements (Sometimes) Matter

Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021, £50.00 hbk (ISBN: 9780745696843), 224 pp.

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One has to agree with the plaudits that this book will nicely accompany other well-written classic social movement texts. Meyer's thorough exploration of the variety of outcomes that social movements have at different stages of their development, and from the multiple forms in which they occur, is interesting, engaging and thorough. The book successfully weaves together contemporary political developments, historical narratives and insights from Meyer's long and successful career in the field of social movement research.

Indeed, one might think of the book as an updated, engaging and somewhat Americanized reinvention of a well-known, but curiously mis-referenced, book published nearly a quarter of a century ago called *How Social Movements Matter* (Giugni et al., 1999). The word 'social' is missing in the referencing. In my reading of Meyer's book, there are four key ways in which the added adverb 'sometimes' is analytically useful. First, and most intuitively, the basic argument is that social movements *do not* always manage to change policy, politics, society and culture. Even when they do so, it is often not exactly in the ways they wanted, or at the time at which they wanted it to happen. Second, we learn that social change is ongoing. This means that the end-point of the ramifications of activism can never be straightforwardly ascertained. The analytical challenge that this creates for scholars is, unfortunately, not quite resolved by the book. Third, interactions between and among activists, movement organizations and institutional actors ensure that outcomes are impossible to ascribe to any particular movement, and sometimes impossible to attribute to movements at all. Fourth, we learn that the telling of stories about the success or failure of movements is often a purposive task, by which I mean to say that such stories are carefully and consciously written in order to mobilize or demobilize future activism. What we learn from common narratives about successful protests, especially those featuring well-known activists like Martin Luther King, is often the tip of the iceberg, rather than the full and deep story of the almost unfathomable ramifications that the broader social movement infrastructure has on social change.

After a gripping introduction to social movements and protest, the book begins at the macro level and works down to the micro. Thus, it starts out with regime change in Chapter 2. Here we learn not much more than established knowledge that an uncertain combination of factors shape long-term regime changes. However, scholars and students will appreciate the update on the outcomes of the so-called Arab Spring. What is perhaps most insightful in relation to the 'success' of movements is the notion that a pro-democracy force winning an election is very different to a successful long-term transition to democracy. Chapter 3 turns to policy mechanisms. A dizzyingly broad range of causes is discussed in this chapter ranging from egg production in California, anti-nuclear energy in Germany through to the UK student anti-fees movement. The geographical spread of the cases is impressive, but the short shrift given to stories of these one-off successes seems to fall foul of Meyer's own implicit advice to be considerate of the long-term dynamism of social change. Meyer dives deeper beyond the iceberg's tip in Chapter 4, where some of the interactions among different organizational types are explored. The benefits and trade-offs of institutionalization are discussed, and the long-term legacies of organizational activities are hinted at. Individual activists appear only in Chapter 5, even though some of the brief stories discussed earlier raise questions about the lives of individual activists. Meyer reveals how activism shapes future activism and personal lifestyles, but misses the opportunity to weave this in to the rest the text by reflecting on how individuals react to and narrate the complex web of other outcomes. Chapter 6 on 'claiming credit' focuses on how activists, organizations and academics come to recreate stories about activism that shape future efforts (or not) to attain social change. I would have liked Meyer to have more expressly stated his own positionality, and to be reflective on how the array of cases somewhat briefly discussed in Chapter 4 might do some (dis) service to the movements discussed and his own argument.

None of my commentary is intended to disparage a fine effort to illustrate how social movements (sometimes) matter. Although I would have preferred fewer causes to have been illustrated, and for those same causes to have been used consistently across all chapters, the lack of depth is somewhat countenanced by its breadth. Moreover, the wide range of causes makes for a lively, upbeat introduction to movement outcomes. For this reason, I imagine that the book will appeal to students more than established scholars. But all audiences will want to take up Meyer's call to arms to understand more about the ways in which stories (including those that we academics write ourselves) intervene in the production of social change outcomes.

Reference

Giugni M, McAdam D and Tilly C (eds) (1999) *How Social Movements Matter*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.