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Dear colleagues,

I trust that this short and incomplete essay will nonetheless provide you with something to chew on for our discussion on Thursday. The essay has been commissioned by *Contemporary Sociology*, the ASA's journal of book reviews. It is supposed to review current work in the social-movements field—meaning books that have been published in the last decade or so—with an emphasis on work by younger scholars.

I would be interested if you find the general framing of it useful and convincing. I draw part of that frame (the section on the disappearance of capitalism) from an essay in a forthcoming volume that John Krinsky is coediting. I would also like to hear if you think there's another book or two out there that I might profitably discuss.

I would be grateful, frankly, for any thoughts you might have about this piece.

Best,  
Jeff

## **Social-Movement Studies Today: An Insider's (Self-)Critique**

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Some very good books on social movements and revolutions have been published in the past decade or so. But they would not be the first that I would recommend to students or general readers who want to think deeply about such matters. Instead, I would recommend that they first read some of the great books that were published during the decade from 1975 to 1984. The field of social-movement studies as we know it today was largely established during this decade. The ideas and texts that circulated during this time reflected a new sensibility about and appreciation for movements, attitudes that were powerfully shaped by the mass movements of the 1960s and early 1970s—above all, the civil rights, anti-war, and women's movements. I would argue that this decade was also the heyday of the field—that is, the period when the very best books on movements and revolutions were written. I continue to assign books published during this decade to both undergraduates and graduate students—and I assign them much more frequently, and to greater effect, than more recently published books.

Perhaps these claims may scandalize some people in the movements field. I certainly hope so. Alas, many of us who write about movements, revolutions, and other forms of “contentious politics” would like to believe that are our collective work, like that of any other putative science, is cumulative and progressive. If this were so, then the very best work in our field, other things being equal, would have been published in recent

years—if not in the last decade, then certainly in the last two. But I just do not think this is the case. I will discuss below some very fine recent books, and mention several others, but I also want to claim that while the state of the art in the movements field has improved in certain respects compared to a generation ago, in some important ways it is actually worse. My own work on movements and revolutions is not exempt from the criticisms that I will outline here.

At least a dozen great books on movements and revolutions were published between 1975 and 1984: Jo Freeman's *The Politics of Women's Liberation* (1975); *The Rebellious Century* (1975) by Charles, Louise, and Richard Tilly; *The Strategy of Social Protest* (1975) by William Gamson; Jeffery Paige's *Agrarian Revolution* (1975); Michael Schwartz's *Radical Protest and Social Structure* (1988 [1976]); *Poor People's Movements* (1977) by Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward; Charles Tilly's *From Mobilization to Revolution* (1978); Theda Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions* (1979); *The Whole World Is Watching* (2003 [1980]) by Todd Gitlin; John Gaventa's *Power and Powerlessness* (1980); *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency* (1999 [1982]) by Doug McAdam; and *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (1984) by Aldon Morris. (Important and influential papers by John McCarthy, Mayer Zald, Anthony Oberschall, David Snow, J. Craig Jenkins, and Charles Perrow were also published during this decade.) Anyone who wishes to think clearly about movements and revolutions should undoubtedly begin by reading these books. They have certainly been enormously influential, directly or indirectly, on subsequent work by scholars. Much of the work of the past 30 years, in fact, has consisted of filling in the

gaps and working through the implications of these books, including the general sensibility about movements which they articulated.

What makes the books listed above so impressive? First, most of them examine a single movement or revolution of great historical importance, or a relatively small set of cases, from start to finish. They thus tangle with virtually all the big questions that mass movements raise: Why did this movement arise when and where it did? Who was behind it? What did these people want, and what strategies did they use? How did the movement evolve over time? Did it succeed? What consequences did it have in both the short and long run? And, on a more normative level, to what degree did the movement or revolution at hand advance the cause of human rights and freedom?

Second, at least some of these books also connect the rise and fall of important movements and revolutions to broader social forces and historical developments in the environing society (and beyond, in some cases). These books were especially interested in tracing connections between movements, on the one hand, and the expansion and transformation of capitalism and states, on the other. They understood movements, in other words, as deeply embedded within the broader sweep of a nation's (or even the world's) history, and they showed how capitalism and states (and sometimes other powerful forces) variously incited, invited, constrained, and destroyed them.

The best recent books in the movements field, by contrast, are much less bold, ambitious, and interesting. To begin with, current scholarship tends to be much more specialized than previously, tightly focusing on just one or two questions about a particular movement or movements, sometimes in excruciating detail. Of course, this type of specialized fact-gathering is typical of the "normal science" that prevails after the

rise of a powerful new theoretical paradigm. At the same time, some scholars have scrutinized movements (or some aspect of them) through a new theoretical optic of greater or lesser power. There is usually something to be learned from both of these genres. But studies that chart the entire historical trajectory of a movement in a theoretically rounded way seem much rarer these days.

Somewhere along the line, furthermore, too many scholars began to study movements of questionable historical importance and impact—perhaps because the great revolutions and movements of the past have been so thoroughly worked over by previous scholarship. Truth be told, some of the “movements” that scholars have recently examined hardly seem like movements at all. They seem too small, too fleeting, or, more often, just too inconsequential to merit a book-length analysis, let alone a book-length answer to just one or two questions about them. I will say no more about this unfortunate tendency.

Finally, too much of the recent scholarship treats movements as if they were hermetically sealed off from broader historical processes and social forces. Studies of movements sometimes neglect the broader sweep of politics, but it is capitalism that is especially conspicuous for its absence in the recent literature (Hetland and Goodwin, 2012). Although it is now largely forgotten, the dynamics of capitalism played an extremely important role in many of the great books on movements and revolutions that were published from 1975 to 1984. It was during this decade, of course, that the scholarly study of movements moved away from primarily psychological treatments of political protest—studies that often cast a very negative light on protest—to more sympathetic analyses that emphasized the importance of resources, power, solidarities, and

opportunities for movements. Movements were no longer viewed as irrational outbursts, but as eminently rational forms of politics by other means. But all this is now common wisdom among movement scholars and other social scientists. What has been forgotten is that the foundational books in our field tended to emphasize quite strongly the effects of capitalism on movements and revolutions, including the aforementioned works by Paige, Schwartz, Piven and Cloward, Tilly, Skocpol, and McAdam (see also Skocpol and Trimberger, 1994 [1977-78]); Anderson-Sherman and McAdam, 1982; and D'Emilio, 1983).

The dynamics of capitalism figure prominently in all of these studies, sometimes constraining and sometimes inciting or enabling collective action. By capitalism, these authors generally mean a mode of production in which a class that owns the means of production (capitalists) employs a class that must sell its labor power in exchange for a wage or salary (workers), and in which market competition among capitalists leads to a constant reinvestment of part of the surplus (or profits) in the production process (i.e., capital accumulation). The dynamics of capitalism that these authors emphasize include processes directly linked to capital accumulation, especially the proletarianization (or commodification) of labor, the commodification of productive forces generally, the concentration and centralization of capital, and the global yet uneven spread of capitalism.

The authors of these groundbreaking works believed that capitalism was crucial for understanding movements due to a variety of important causal mechanisms: Capitalist institutions (factories, railroads, banks, etc.) or institutions that capitalists may come to control (e.g., parties, legislatures, courts, police, armies, etc.) are often the source or

target of popular grievances, especially (but not only) during times of economic crisis. These institutions, moreover, enable and shape collective identities and solidarities—and not just *class* solidarities—in particular ways; they also distribute power and resources unevenly to different social classes and class fractions; and they both facilitate and inhibit specific group alliances based on common or divergent material interests. Class divisions, furthermore, often penetrate and fracture movements that are not based on class identities; and ideologies and cultural assumptions associated with capitalism powerfully shape movement strategies and demands. The effects of capitalism on collective action, for these authors, are both direct and indirect (i.e., mediated by other processes) and are the result of both short- and long-term processes.

In McAdam's (1999 [1982]) influential study of the U.S. civil rights movement, to take one well known example, the disintegration of the Southern cotton sharecropping economy, which was based on "extra-economic" coercion, and the concomitant movement of African Americans into urban-based waged jobs, is portrayed as a necessary precondition for the emergence of that movement. McAdam writes, "If one had to identify the factor most responsible for undermining the political conditions that, at the turn of the [twentieth] century, had relegated blacks to a position of political impotence, it would have to be the gradual collapse of cotton as the backbone of the southern economy" (McAdam 1999 [1982]: 73).

The collapse of the South's cotton economy, in McAdam's account, facilitated the emergence of the civil rights movement mainly indirectly, through its effects on politics and on the "indigenous organization" and beliefs of African Americans. Note, moreover, that this economic process was primarily responsible for the very possibility of

the civil rights movement even though this movement was not itself a *class*-based insurgency making primarily economic demands; rather, the movement was a cross-class coalition—linking working- and middle-class African Americans as well as sympathetic whites—whose primary demands (at least until the movement began to fracture in the mid-1960s) were desegregation and voting rights. (See also D’Emilio [1983], which emphasizes how capitalism facilitated the emergence of gay identities and movements.) McAdam explicitly noted that his “political process” perspective on movements “combines aspects of both the elite and Marxist models of power in America” [1999 (1982): 38].)

The groundbreaking movement scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s, one might note, not only emphasized the causal importance of capitalism for collective action but also tended to view capitalism, ultimately, as a major—and perhaps *the* major—constraint on human freedom. A number of these studies have an unmistakably anti-capitalist tone, a normative quality that has all but vanished from contemporary scholarship on movements. To take just two examples, Piven and Cloward begin their study of “poor people’s movements” with a critique of the “mystifying” quality of capitalist democracy:

Power is rooted in the control of coercive force and in control of the means of production. However, in capitalist societies this reality is not legitimated by rendering the powerful divine, but by obscuring their existence. . . . [through] electoral-representative institutions [that] proclaim the franchise, not force and wealth, as the basis for the accumulation of power. (Piven and Cloward, 1977: 2)

And Skocpol concludes her important comparative study of revolutions by suggesting that “Marx’s call for working-class-based socialism remains valid for advanced societies; nothing in the last hundred years of world history has undercut the compelling potential, indeed necessity, of that call” (Skocpol, 1979: 292).

Most recent studies of social movements lack not only this anti-capitalist spirit but usually *any* explicit normative standpoint; they seem more concerned with contributing to the specialized academic literature on movement dynamics than with pondering how movements might lead us to the good society. But more to the point, the recent literature has also largely ignored, with very few exceptions (e.g., Paige, 1997; Buechler, 2000; Clawson, 2003), the enabling and constraining effects of capitalism. In particular, as Richard Flacks has noted, “One of Marx’s central analytic strategies . . . is missing from contemporary theories [of social movements]—namely, his effort to embed power relations in *an analysis of the political economy as a whole*” (Flacks, 2004: 139; emphasis added).

Recent scholarship tends to overlook not only the direct and proximate effects of capitalist institutions on collective action, but also the ways in which capitalist dynamics indirectly influence the possibilities for protest, sometimes over many years or even decades, by, for example, shaping political institutions, political alliances, social ties, and cultural idioms. Instead, recent scholarship tends to focus on *short-term* shifts in “cultural framings,” social networks, and especially “political opportunities,” or simply takes these shifts as a given, rarely examining their deeper causes. In fact, most movement scholars now treat this last set of factors—ideas, social ties, and political processes—as

independent variables, neglecting the ways in which they may be powerfully shaped by capitalism.

A concern with political economy is only barely evident, for example, in the books and articles that have been honored in recent years by the American Sociological Association's section on Collective Behavior and Social Movements. (Full disclosure: I am currently chair of this section.) The section's website (<http://www2.asanet.org/sectioncbm/awards.html>) lists 19 books that received the section's book prize from 1988 to 2010 (a prize was not awarded every year) and 12 articles that received the section's best article prize from 2002 to 2010 (there were co-winners for some of these years). Only two of the prize-winning books and none of the articles, so far as I can determine, treat the dynamics of capitalism as especially important for purposes of explanation. The two books are Rick Fantasia's *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action and Contemporary American Workers* (1988), a study of working-class consciousness in the contemporary United States, and Charles Tilly's *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1754-1837* (1995), which looks at class-based (and other) forms of mobilization during the period under study. In the rest of these books and articles, capitalism is at best a minor theme, if it is mentioned at all.

The strange disappearance of capitalism from social-movement studies finds its apotheosis in Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow's *Contentious Politics* (2007), a textbook based on ideas first developed in McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly's much-discussed *Dynamics of Contention* (2001). As I noted, earlier work by Tilly and McAdam did emphasize—indeed, often *strongly* emphasized—capitalist dynamics, including the collapse of agricultural production based on extra-economic coercion (McAdam) and the

more general process of proletarianization (Tilly). In *Contentious Politics*, however, capitalism has disappeared utterly. The book makes no mention whatsoever of capitalism, proletarianization, class conflict, or political economy generally. This is rather remarkable for a book explicitly designed to provide undergraduate and graduate students with the analytic tools and concepts they will need to understand social movements, revolutions, and “contentious politics” generally. Instead of situating these conflicts against the historical backdrop of capitalism and state-building, as Tilly once prescribed, *Contentious Politics* discusses (and formally defines) a number of very general “mechanisms” and “processes” that allegedly illuminate—or at least re-describe—a wide range of concrete episodes of political conflict. The authors make some effort to link these mechanisms and processes to state structures and “routine” politics, but they say nothing about how these mechanisms and processes might relate to the dynamics of capitalism on a local, national, or international scale. One can only infer that either no such connections exist or they are not worthy of attention, such that students today need not bother to learn about the institutions and dynamic tendencies of capitalist economies in order to understand social movements, revolutions, or political conflict more generally. By contrast, Tilly wrote in 1978, in *From Mobilization to Revolution*: “Over the long run, the reorganization of production creates the chief historical actors, the major constellations of interests, the basic threats to those interests, and principal conditions for transfers of power [i.e., revolutions]” (Tilly, 1978: 194). But the “reorganization of production” is not to be found among the mechanisms and processes emphasized by Tilly and Tarrow thirty years later.

What happened? What might account for the disappearance of capitalism from social movement studies? Here, I can only speculate, but this transformation seems closely related to several linked factors, including the waning after the 1970s of Marxism in the social sciences, the rise of “state-centered” and “historical institutionalist” perspectives in political sociology, the so-called “cultural turn” in academia more generally, and a growing emphasis on micro- and meso-level analysis—including framing and network analysis—in social-movement studies proper. (It is also possible that some scholars in the U.S. have avoided the conceptual vocabulary if not the concerns of Marxian political economy in particular for fear of not being published or tenured.) My point here is certainly not to criticize cultural (including framing) or network analysis, but simply to point out that these have effectively—and *unnecessarily*—“crowded out” a concern with political economy in the movements field. As a result, a number of potentially important causal mechanisms linked to the dynamics of capitalism are no longer even considered worthy of attention by movement scholars.

So what then has the past generation of movement scholars been up to? If they have tended to overlook the economic base of society, they have certainly not neglected the political and ideological superstructure. Recent scholarship, as I noted earlier, has explored in an ever-more-nuanced and detailed way just how (1) culture in its various guises, (2) social and organizational ties, and perhaps especially (3) environing political processes (often conceptualized as “political opportunities”) shape different aspects of movements and revolutions—their origins, actions, consequences, etc. Four noteworthy books by younger scholars illustrate some of the central analytic concerns within the movements field in recent years. Deborah Gould’s *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT*

*UP's Fight Against AIDS* (2009) explores the role of emotions for a prominent social movement organization. Ziad Munson's *The Making of Pro-Life Activists* (2008) looks at how committed activists are created by movements. *The Civil Rights Movement and the Logic of Social Change* (2011) by Joseph Luders revisits the black freedom struggle in order to understand the outcomes or consequences of movements. And Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan's *Why Civil Resistance Works* (2011) examines the comparative efficacy of violent and nonviolent movement strategies. Many other fine books have of course been published on social movements in recent years, including by younger scholars, but these four rank among the finest. I can recommend them all. They are a good barometer of what the sharpest scholars in the field are doing (and not doing) today.

Gould's *Moving Politics* (2009) is an unusually ambitious book by contemporary standards insofar as it examines the rise, accomplishments, and decline of an important social-movement organization—the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, better known as ACT UP—during the 1980s and 1990s. In this ambition it hearkens back to the field's foundational texts. Unlike those texts, however, Gould examines ACT UP with an admittedly one-sided analytic focus: She is interested in how emotions illuminate the historical trajectory of the group. Gould also briefly considers the importance of “political opportunities” for ACT UP (which she finds negligible), and she explores its animating ideas and “cultural framings.” Not surprisingly, there is little political economy in her analysis, although there is some discussion of the organization of health care in the United States as well as at least some recognition of the class divisions and conflict within the gay and lesbian movement. In short, emotions are almost always front and center in Gould's analysis.

Gould is especially interested in the “emotional habitus” of groups, that is, their “collective and only partly conscious emotional dispositions” (2009: 32), and in the “emotion work” that movements do—that is, their work to generate “emotions that mesh with the movement’s political objectives and tactics” and to suppress emotions “that do the opposite” (2009: 32, 213). Some emotion work, she shows, is all about changing a population’s emotional habitus or dispositions so as to encourage collective and indeed confrontational action. This was in fact the challenge that AIDS activists successfully met, for the most part, as they confronted gay men and lesbians who were deeply ambivalent, Gould argues, about both themselves and American society.

Now, it has been little more than a decade since some of us in the movements field began writing about emotions and movements (e.g., Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, 2001; Aminzade and McAdam, 2001; Emirbayer and Goldberg, 2005). Gould’s book is the most fully realized study to date with this analytic focus (but see also Summers-Effler, 2010). But does this focus necessitate a substantial rethinking of the way we analyze movements, or does it simply add a new wrinkle? I think it is safe to say that the jury is still out. Many scholars, in my experience, are clearly not persuaded that we need emotions to explain collective action, since we have a range of concepts—interests, ideas, identities, incentives, etc.—that already seem perfectly adequate to the task. Besides, skeptics ask, how can one possibly untangle emotions from the ideas and relationships with which they are always tightly wrapped and weigh their allegedly independent force?

I have found that one of the most effective ways to convince skeptics of the importance of emotions for movements is to point out that activists themselves, unschooled in the latest academic fads, certainly think they are important, if only

implicitly. Could it be that they know something that many “experts” on movements do not? I think they do, and this something is evident to anyone who has been to even a few protests or political meetings. There, activists routinely engage in just the type of emotion work that Gould discusses. With their speeches, chants, bodily gestures, and occasional recourse to music and song, activists often try to make us angry and outraged. Or to despise some group. Or to encourage us. Or to make us feel pride and love for one another. But activists almost never act as if interests or ideas alone are enough to make us act. Instead, they act as if one or another emotion is *also* necessary for collective action, and they clearly try hard to generate that emotion in their audience. To be sure, I have never heard activists haggle over the relative importance of emotions versus interests, or emotions versus ideas, but they seem to take the potential importance of emotions for protest for granted. And I can only imagine they have arrived at this understanding of collective action through trial and error: They strive to generate certain emotions in their audience because they have found that such emotions are actually necessary, if only some of the time, for generating collective action.

Now, it is perhaps possible that these activists are mistaken. Perhaps nothing would change fundamentally if they all just calmed down and spoke to audiences in Spock-like tones. Perhaps all their emoting is just an empty ritual, something they do because they think it is expected of them, not because they have any reason to believe that this emoting will actually induce people to act together. But surely this criticism is implausible. So far as I can tell, political activists from very different times and places have all engaged in the general kind of emotion work practiced by the AIDS activists whom Gould studied. Take a look at old film clips of Lenin and Trotsky. Or of Martin

Luther King Jr. Or look at videos of activists in the Arab world today. The transcultural reach of certain oratorical strategies and gestures suggests that these are not just culturally specific rituals, but time-tested strategies that must in fact work to generate collective action—or work often enough—or else they would have been abandoned long ago for more effective strategies. In sum, I am convinced of the importance of emotion work for movements (and no doubt many other forms of collective action), and Gould’s chapters on the emotion work of AIDS activists in *Moving Politics* are perhaps the clearest and most persuasive in her book.

Emotions also come to the fore in Ziad Munson’s *The Making of Pro-Life Activists* (2008), although he does not explicitly analyze them. In an important sense, however, this is also a book about efforts to create a new emotional disposition in people, namely, a deep commitment to particular ideas and ways of acting in the world. Munson does look briefly at the origins of the pro-life movement, but he does not systematically examine its political achievements. Once again, there is no political-economic analysis in these pages: Neither the class basis of the pro-life movement nor its chief funding sources are discussed in detail, and Munson says little about how the movement intersects or interacts with elites in the Republican Party or the corporate community. Munson’s chief concern is indicated by his book’s subtitle, *How Social Movement Mobilization Works*. For Munson, “mobilization” means something like the production of committed activists, people who regularly and indeed routinely contribute to and participate in a social movement (Munson, 2008: 48 [figure 3.1]).

The creation of committed activists has actually received a fair amount of scholarly study in the movements field (e.g., Whalen and Flacks, 1989; Hirsch, 1990;

Lichterman, 1996; Klatch, 1999). The surprising finding in Munson's book is that many people who became dedicated pro-life activists initially had either mixed or indifferent ideas about the abortion issue (20 percent of the activists he studied) or even pro-choice sympathies (a remarkable 23 percent). So how did these people get involved in the pro-life movement? And how were their heads turned around? The answer to the first question is largely happenstance. Munson writes that people "stumbled" into contact with the movement "as an unintended consequence of their ordinary lives." The motivation for such contact was "seldom concern over abortion; contact occurs through the ordinary experiences of one's life" (2008: 44, 49). Echoing earlier studies of recruitment to movements, Munson found that 80 percent of the activists he interviewed came into contact with the pro-life movement through family, friends, or religious networks.

A gradual process of resocialization—some might call it brainwashing—then ensued for the newly recruited. Munson's description of the pro-life movement no doubt accurately describes a great many movements:

Much of what the pro-life movement actually does centers on inculcating a pro-life worldview in its own activists. The wide range of pro-life activities—from meetings and petition drives to rallies and protests—are first and foremost venues in which activists interact with one another and hear new information and new ideas about abortion. This is the mechanism by which pro-life beliefs become articulated through action. Initially vague and inchoate, [activists'] "thin" ideas about abortion become richer, more coherent, more consistent, and more complex through participation in pro-life work. (Munson, 2008: 189)

Just as Gould is persuasive about the importance of emotion work for movements, Munson convinces me that many movement organizations serve as ideological hothouses for the production of committed activists. And we now know that these activists may start out with very different political ideas.

Still to come:

Discussion of Luders on movement outcomes

Discussion of Chenoweth & Stephan on the efficacy of movement strategies

Discussion of another book or two?

Brief conclusion: Contemporary movement scholars could be more ambitious

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Understanding Social Movements: Theories from the Classical Era to the Present; Theories of Political Protest and Social Movements: A Multidisciplinary Introduction, Critique, and Synthesis; Social Movements: The Key Concepts. Michael DeCesarea a Department of Sociology, Merrimack College, 315 Turnpike Street, North Andover, MA01845, USA Published online: 09 Oct 2013. To cite this article: Michael DeCesare , Social Movement Studies (2013): Understanding "An Insider's Critique of the Social Movement Framing Perspective." Sociological Inquiry 67:409-430.Google Scholar. Bernstein, M. 1997. Social Movement Studies 4:185-208.Google Scholar. Billig, M. 1987. Arguing and Thinking. Social Movements and Culture Reflecting the recent surge of interest in culture, this volume brings together top researchers in the field of social movements whose work represents the major approaches to movement analysis from a cultural perspective. The contributors address such issues as approaches to culture; how movements are affected by the culture of the larger society in which they act; and the internal cultures of these movements.