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Movements, Parties, and Hybrids

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Sidney Tarrow's *Movements and Parties* has the qualities of a classic. It brings remarkable theoretical lucidity and erudition to bear on a wealth of comparative and historical empirical research in analyzing pressing questions for democratic politics: what happens when movements and parties operate in close linkage? How do movements shape the internal life of parties, their developmental trajectory, the character of party systems, and the dynamics of inter-party democratic competition? What are the consequences of close movement-party interactions for democracy itself, and how have they played out in the long arc of American history? That *Movements and Parties* examines these questions with respect to urgent concerns of our times—namely, the global threats to democracy, illiberal backlashes, and the rollback of civil and political rights—renders it a particularly timely book. It adds a much-needed social movement dimension to current debates about political regime trajectories by theorizing about their pivotal role in democratization and de-democratization: just as social movements have historically helped to produce major democratic advances by including historically marginalized groups into the political process and expanding citizenship rights, they can also, under certain circumstances, become a threat to democracy.

The book is impressive in scope and depth. Taking a macro-level approach that is both general and nuanced, it traces the effect of movements on American political development and emphasizes the issue of mutual influences between movements and parties since the Civil War era until today. In so doing, Tarrow very effectively bridges the scholarly literatures on these two forms of collective action. Although there have been recent efforts to link these literatures together, especially by looking at empirical referents outside the United States, these literatures tend to travel parallel paths with little systematic conversation. That movements and parties remain separate fields of study is at least partially because their study is embedded in different disciplines—sociology and political science—which often use different methodological approaches and that are built upon different intellectual traditions. While political science tends to focus on formal institutional arenas, sociology is more open to the study of social actors and networks. Tarrow skillfully bridges the gap

between institutionalized and non-institutionalized forms of expression by showing that, in effect, movements and parties intersect periodically in different critical junctures. He argues that these intersections have been central in and consequential to American history, sometimes helping to “deepen” or extend democracy and other times pushing in the opposite direction—a major contribution, I think, to the study of social movements and their impact on institutions.

Movements and Parties convincingly shows that movements both shape and are in turn shaped by political institutions. Relying on an erudite synthesis of existing scholarship in sociology and political science (and an impressive command of historical work), Tarrow charts long-term trajectories of movement-party linkages in American history. Social movements, he tells us, have been key to the transformation of parties and party systems throughout American history, and have often made their way into different forms of electoral mobilization—from the antislavery and Republican alliance in the 1860s (Chapter 2), to the transformation of the agrarian movement into the Populist Party in the 1880s and 1890s (Chapter 3), to the diverging partisan alignments of women’s movements in the early twentieth century (Chapter 4), and to the impact of organized labor and the civil rights movement on the Democratic Party in the 1960s (Chapter 5). And yet, although these “critical connections” are hardly novel, movement-party relations have become far more intimate in recent decades, culminating, most clearly, in a fusion between the Republican Party, the party’s grass-roots movement bases (Christian nationalist, white ethno-nationalist, and pro-gun rights groups, among others) and what Hacker and Pierson (2020) call its “plutocratic” base—a fusion that paved the way for Donald Trump’s political ascent and shaped his administration, including his turbulent electoral loss in 2021 and self-coup attempt. These types of fusions are not unique to the United States, however, and they will likely look familiar to scholars of comparative political parties and comparative politics more broadly. Indeed, although there has been a persistent tendency to study movements and parties as separate entities, democratic competition in much of the world today appears to be structured around hybrid modes of democratic representation, and there is, with some cross-national variation, a decreasing differentiation and distancing between social movements and parties. In several instances, entire party systems have been reconfigured by the rise of movement-based parties.

In times where the causal inference tradition appears to have dominant status in empirical social science, charting long-term historical trajectories is an especially welcome methodological approach. It is especially strong at developing theoretical propositions and opening new lines of inquiry that can be refined with more detailed empirical work. *Movements and Parties* can therefore be read not only as an attempt at synthesizing a vast amount of theoretical and historical material, but also as an important step toward theory building and as an agenda-setting contribution. The description of major episodes of movement and party interactions in American politics is a strength of the book, and I have found Chapter 5 on the civil rights particularly illustrative in showing the indirect and long-term effect of movements on institutional politics. At the same time, a significant advantage of macro-level approaches in general is that they privilege the “big picture” over the details of specific episodes. Tarrow’s charting of movements and parties in relation to each other allows for an examination that goes well beyond the internal life of parties in specific moments and institutional configurations and identifies recurrent patterns. For example, it stems from his analysis that although the strength of movement-party connections can often boost the mobilizational and electoral capacity of parties—and even push parties to be open and internally responsive to their organized bases—those connections can also at times undermine their electoral fortunes in the long run by making parties look like they have been captured by special interests. The boundaries that separate movements and parties might be increasingly blurry, but at the end of the day movements and parties have distinct logics, sources of power, and impulses that are hard to reconcile. These types of observations, in turn, invite further comparative cross-national analysis.

As a student of movements and parties in Latin America, my remaining comments focus on two areas where *Movements and Parties* holds particular interest and comparative scope: first, its discussion of hybrid organizational formats and the extent to which the patterns observed in the United States are more broadly generalizable across regions; and second, its discussion of political polarization processes.

Seen from a comparative angle, a fascinating aspect of the book is that it documents how similar recent structural changes linked to the implementation of neoliberal policies—for example, the deepening of social inequalities, economic and financial volatility, social vulnerability, among others—appear to have produced a parallel “movementization” of parties in the United States and in contexts like Latin America and Southern Europe. The similarities in the latter two regions in terms of emerging patterns of mobilization, and the rise of “movement-based” parties against these trends, have been widely studied by Donatella della Porta, Joseba Fernández, Hara Kouki, and Lorenzo Mosca (della Porta et al. 2017), Kenneth Roberts (2019), and Enrico Padoan (2020), among several others, and have generated different interpretations of the deeper structural forces shaping collective action (Hutter, Kriesi, and Vidal 2018). That debate has many moving parts, and I cannot summarize them here. But what is clear is that the consequences of neoliberal policies meant different things for right- and left-wing movements and parties. They created distinct political dilemmas for each side of the ideological spectrum, and part of the “movementization” that Tarrow discusses can be seen as partial solutions to those dilemmas.

Consider the example of the Republican Party in the United States. In seeking to expand its social base, it turned to vibrant right-wing movements and absorbed them; in the process, it became overtaken by them. The Republican Party also politicized the cultural axis of political competition by appealing to religious identities and moral traditionalism, and by fueling anti-immigrant sentiments to attract support; and in so doing, it became “an instrument for what would otherwise be unpopular economic programs” (Tarrow 2021, 141; see also Hacker and Pierson 2020). As Tarrow further argues, left-wing movements and the Democratic Party did not achieve the same kind of movement-party fusion, and it remains unclear what lies in store for them in the future. *Movements and Parties*, therefore, discusses two different models of party-movement interactions and resulting organizational formats in the United States. Whereas absorption of movement currents seems to be more common on the right side of the spectrum, group-based structuring—through the accretion of new groups, such as women, African Americans, and other minorities—appears more common on the left. This appears to be the obverse to prominent examples in Latin America (Anria 2018). As an explanatory enterprise setting out the roots of variation of these different modal patterns, however, the book does not offer sufficient theoretical guidelines. It does generate several research questions: Do the types or families of movements matter, and, if so, what movement properties are especially relevant? What are the implications of a party having movement ties that aim at restricting democracy, while the other has party-movement ties that aim to deepen or extend democracy? If movement types are not the critical variables, what are some plausible hypotheses?

Students of Latin American movements and parties will be especially curious about Tarrow’s notion of hybridity, and about the conditions under which the arguments apply beyond the United States. Hybridity has a long lineage in the study of Latin American politics and cultural studies, most clearly in the work of Néstor García Canclini (2006), who used it to reflect on the mixing of cultures, but also in studies of movements and parties (Anria 2013). In Chapter 7, looking within contemporary American politics, Tarrow identifies three different types of movement-party hybrids, which he labels horizontal, vertical, and blended. An example of a “horizontal hybrid” would be the antiwar movement and the Democratic Party, which in the early 2000s were united in political interests but sharply separated in terms of function. An example of a “vertical hybrid” would be the Koch brothers’ network that developed outside the Republican Party but became gradually influential within it in the 1980s and 1990s. And finally, a paradigmatic example of a “blended hybrid” would be the Tea Party movement, which, as the work of Skocpol and Williamson (2016) shows, had bottom-up origins as well

as strong connections with interest groups and mass media amplification. This movement launched an insurgency within, and eventually gained control over, the Republican Party. Underlying this conceptual development is a notion that parties are somewhat fixed in the political arena—they are always there even though they rise and fall in strength in different electoral cycles. But movements, by contrast, tend to come and go in a much more dramatic fashion, and they look for ways to aligning themselves with parties.

While students of Latin American politics will surely recognize empirical referents of these hybrids, some may wonder about how far these types of interactions travel and what forces produce one modal path versus the other. In Latin America, for example, both movements and parties come and go quite dramatically, and at times movements are more permanent than parties. At other times, they also produce alternate hybrids, as when they themselves become parties, such as the Brazilian Workers' Party (PT), the Ecuadorean Pachakutik Plurinational Unity Movement (MUPP), or the Bolivian Movement Toward Socialism (MAS). This begs the questions of how broadly generalizable the patterns described in *Movements and Parties* are, and the extent to which they are peculiar to the United States or contingent on specific institutional constellations and organizational fields.

It also opens additional theoretical questions. In his classic chapter about the transition from movements into parties, Kitschelt (2006) claims that those types of parties are often best seen as “transitional phenomena,” in the sense that the modal pattern is for movements to create a given party that then “normalizes” over time. But the “transitioning into what” is not yet fully settled. Although in Kitschelt's view the creation of parties by movements is rare, when it happens it generally gives way to conventional forms of politics rather than a hybrid. *Movements and Parties* invites us to reconsider this point and to think about longer-term trajectories: Is the Republican Party an organizational anomaly in comparative terms, in the sense that as a long-established party has become “movementized”? Or, seen from historical and comparative terms, has it followed an alternative path—from an electoral vehicle for the antislavery movement in the 1850s (Chapter 2), to mainstream party in much of the twentieth century, to a hybrid controlled by movement forces on the other end of the spectrum since the mid-1960s (Chapters 6 and 7)?

My second comment is about processes of political polarization. Given that several democratic regimes in Latin America have become increasingly polarized over the past few decades, readers of *Movements and Parties* might be interested in what Tarrow has to say to this debate. He carefully reminds us that, while polarization can be elite-driven, its character and intensity can be also shaped by dynamics “from below.” Going against dominant accounts that emphasize the perils of polarization and see it as having pernicious paralyzing effects, he also reminds us that polarization is not always bad for democracy and that some level of conflict can in fact be healthy for democracy, especially in contexts of high inequality or severe power asymmetries, where challenges to those asymmetries by those at the bottom are invariably conflictual and elicit conservative reaction. This is an angle that several prominent volumes on the challenges to democracy in the United States either systematically ignore or downplay, and it therefore stands as an important contribution of *Movements and Parties*. It also has broad appeal and lends itself to theoretical and empirical comparative analysis.

Chapter 9 begins to develop the question about polarization both theoretically and comparatively. It has many moving parts that I cannot adequately summarize here. But it advances a dialectical understanding of polarization (Tarrow calls it “relational”), where movements that push to include new groups into the democratic process and expand rights often trigger counter-movements pushing in the opposite direction. I found this approach refreshing and ripe for comparative analysis. While some of this is done in Chapter 9, where Tarrow compares movement and counter-movement interactions and their impact on regime trajectories in Italy, Chile, and South Korea, what is needed is a more systematic comparative analysis specifying

interacting variables and plausible alternative explanations. Such approach can illustrate and theorize about the conditional effects of polarization, contentious politics, and cooperation in democracy, and can generate insight into the conditions that bring about democratic progress versus backlashes and rollbacks. This question, I suspect, will raise yet another weighty one about the larger role of social movements in democratic politics. While in *Movements and Parties* they seem to matter most to the extent that they engage in linkage efforts with parties, one may wonder about other non-electoral dimensions where movements might be doing the heavy lifting in shaping polarization processes and political regime trajectories. The possibilities for further research are stimulating.

These are ultimately the strengths of an ambitious book that takes the long view, and I hope I have identified some areas where more work can be done in the future. *Movements and Parties* traces relevant patterns across American history and develops promising cross-national comparisons. As all excellent books do, it answers some important questions and raises many more. It is the kind of “big picture” book that I have been waiting to read for a long time, and I cannot recommend it highly enough.

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