The Society

Social Scientists Studying Social Movements (https://thesocietypages.org/roundtables/social-movements/)

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Roundtable (https://thesocietypages.org/roundtables/)
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Eds. Note: This is the first of many Roundtable installments to come—a wide-ranging attempt to look at a topic through many different sociological lenses. Soon, we'll be taking on politics and humor and how sociologists and political scientists each have a different idea of just what polling is and does. Enjoy!

A Minnesotan by the name of Bob Dylan once sang "the times they are a changin'." It was the '60s then, but with the rise of the Tea Party, "The Arab Spring," the Wisconsin state house standoff, and the global spread of the Occupy Movement, Dylan's lyrics seem just as fresh in 2012. In this, our first Round Table, we turn to a number of scholars (sociologists along with a political scientist and a geographer) who have spent time studying social movements to get a better sense of conducting their

research and the difficult decisions they make during the process. We sought scholars who have not only produced excellent work, but who also represent a variety of methodological approaches—historical, theoretical, ethnographic, and quantitative—and we hope you find their insights as fascinating as we do.

Briefly describe your study and what drew you to this topic?

Myra Marx Ferree: I've looked at various feminist organizing practices and organizations in the U.S., Germany, and Russia. I'll focus on the German cases, since many of the methods issues of studying movements come to the fore. I actually got involved in studying German feminists when I was teaching for a semester in Frankfurt and had feminist students in my class—their comments made clear that my assumptions about how "feminism" operated were based on my American experience and I needed to rethink the role of political context more.

Fabio Rojas: I am a sociologist who focuses on organizational behavior and politics. I was drawn to this topic in graduate school when I wanted to study curricular change in universities. I discovered that many academic disciplines are promoted by social movements, and that resulted in my book on the rise of Black Studies. Later, I began a longitudinal study of the anti-Iraq War movement, so that I might study a movement in progress, rather than retrospectively.

Jeffrey Alexander: My *Performative Revolution in Egypt: An Essay in Cultural Power* emerged from a confluence of intellectual and political interests. Intellectually, I had the ambition to extend the strong program in cultural sociology to a revolutionary event. Politically, beginning in late January 2011, I became intensely involved as a spectator in the events that were unfolding in Tahrir Square in Cairo.

Nathan Clough: My dissertation research was an ethnographic study of the social mobilization against the 2008 Republican National Convention

in St. Paul, Minnesota. In particular, I examined the interactions between the anarchist RNC Welcoming Committee, which attempted to organize a blockade to prevent Republican delegates from reaching the convention site, and a broad anti-war coalition of national and local progressive groups that organized a large-scale march to decry Republican priorities. My research documented how the anarchists and the anti-war liberals negotiated each others' use of public space in order to advance their respective protest goals.

Neal Caren and Sarah Gaby: We were interested in how protest movements use social networking sites. Our prior research had focused on how white nationalists were able to form an online community, and then we noticed that Occupy Wall Street had a large presence on Facebook, even though the movement's focus was clearly on off-line activism. We were interested in exploring how many people were active on Facebook Occupy sites and what people were doing there. …The density [of activity] was greatest in college towns. Students were adapting the networking tool they were familiar with for sharing pictures of cute cats to share pictures of WWII veterans holding up signs about corporate welfare.

David S. Meyer: I wrote my doctoral dissertation 100 years ago on the nuclear freeze movement. I've been interested in social movements and social change since long before college, and I was determined to write about something contemporary. Although I wasn't particularly interested in nuclear weapons issues when I was in graduate school, that was the largest contemporary movement.

What was your original methodological plan?

Ferree: I began with a mix of ethnographic observations—including a lot of hanging out in places that my students suggested—and collecting movement documents, both things that feminists produced and things written about feminists (mostly not friendly) by other student movements and left organizations like unions. I then went back to Germany some

years later to specifically study the institutionalization of what had been very assertively anti-bureaucratic feminist projects and their rapprochement with the male left (both in the “new left” Green party and in “old left” unions). Having made friends in earlier years with feminist activists, their introductions both helped me define a sample of movement folks who were going into government positions and get access to them.

Rojas: At first, my collaborator, Michael Heaney of the University of Michigan, and I focused on a survey of antiwar protestors. So far, we have collected over 10,000 surveys from people who attended antiwar events from 2004 to 2010. Later, we decided to employ a mixed method strategy, realizing we had an excellent opportunity to directly observe the inner workings of a major American social movement. We could also do ethnography, interviews, and collect qualitative data, since we were already at the protests and knew many of the key players. After seven years, we now have one of the deepest collections of materials on any social movement ever assembled. This will allow us to write an unusually rich and nuanced account of a major social movement and perhaps expand our project beyond the study of street protest to ask broader questions about how movements relate to political parties and other institutions.

Alexander: I knew from that beginning of my research that I would approach this social movement entirely through published texts aimed at expanding or restricting sympathy with the movement. I used newspaper and television texts in four Western countries (the U.S., the U.K., France, and Italy) and print, television, and social media in Egypt, in both English and Arabic. This is what I call a “media ethnography” because, unlike most studies of social movements, it does not involve personal contact with the groups—in this case the revolutionaries and their supporters and opponents.

Clough: My methodological plan was to join the RNC Welcoming

Committee and undertake a participatory action project to create connections between that group and other protest organizations. My methodology was unorthodox because I suspected that the group I was working with might be subject to significant police repression, so I took precautions to avoid taking notes on any tactical operations discussed or carried out, focusing instead on the ways that a diversity of tactics impacted alliance politics between groups.

Caren and Gaby: Facebook has developed a set of tools for developers to integrate Facebook data with other applications. Facebook, unlike Twitter, also stores data for a very long time. While posts to an average person's Facebook page are private, for very good reasons, those set up for public groups like Occupy Wall Street or Occupy Durham are public. This means anyone can see all the posts or comments, and that any researcher can download the data. So we cobbled together a list of the 400+ Occupy pages and wrote a script that would download all their Facebook posts and comments. We are particularly interested in those who are active on multiple Occupy pages. To what extent can we use these folks to measure the degree of connectedness between different Occupations?

Increasingly, scholars will have access to what movement participants and sympathizers are discussing as a movement progresses…This level and volume of detail can help us explore a series of questions about how sympathizers understand and interact with movements.

Meyer: I started with just a determination to learn everything I could. Pretty haphazardly, I stumbled into a three-pronged approach: I began participating in a local activist group, I started working as a researcher in a think tank engaged in the movement, and I began historical research using every kind of document I could find. Almost all the data I used in the dissertation and in my first book came from the third stream of research. But activist ties allowed me interview access to national leaders, and my co-workers at the think tank were an invaluable source

of source information on policy.

Was gaining access to the group difficult? Did anyone question your motivation? And how did you figure out what to focus on?

Ferree: I had the advantage of being a foreigner, which made me a bit of a curiosity. It also was a good excuse for asking "stupid" questions about politics and still being accepted as a feminist. For example, I was instructed that I should never use the formal form of the German "you" with another feminist, but that was done kindly and not as a rejection of my feminist credentials. So I could ask just about anything. On the whole, I followed the topic not a specific group… I wanted to get views both of those who were doing this radical thing and those who hated the very idea.

Rojas: Protesters are surprisingly easy to study because most protests are boring. Even though protesters are excited, they often have to wait a long time for the march or speech. Therefore, they are usually quite happy to fill out a short survey. Over the years, my partner and I got to know the leadership of the movement, which facilitated interviews and observation. At first, our focus was on the ordinary folks who attended protests. As the project matured, we have tried to interview or observe a much wider range of people, including as elected leaders, movement organizers, and movement activists. People do occasionally question my motivation; some think I work for the police. However, I explain that I am a university-based researcher and that assures most people.

Clough: The group I studied maintained an open policy, you just had to agree to the principles of unity, which consisted of pledging an opposition to capitalism, the state, racism, colonialism, sexism, etc. I started attending meetings study the politics of the RNC, but not to study the social movement itself. After several months of participating in group meetings I brought up my desire to study the interaction between the anarchists and the more mainstream liberal groups; the other members had no objections after I made it clear that I would not be taking notes on

our meetings or studying any tactical issues. I think that if I had just walked in and asked the members if I could study them on day one, I would have been laughed out of the room. Anarchists in the U.S. have a reputation for a certain anti-intellectualism, but I think this is deeply misplaced. They are some of the most intellectual activists I've ever met, they just have no respect at all for the hierarchy that comes along with higher ed (pun intended). It was really incumbent upon me to tell them how my research was secondary to my activism, but also how I thought my analysis of the events of the RNC could be useful for future mobilizations—a claim I would be much more hesitant to make at this point.

Meyer: I realized fairly early on that I had to pursue answers to questions for which I really wanted answers instead of seeking to validate political positions I was committed to. This meant, for example, that I wouldn't consider the merits of the nuclear freeze as an arms control proposal in my dissertation. I was interested in why ideas took off at some times and not others, and I stumbled into this question through conversations with activists… I found that in order to understand the movement, I had to understand the issues that it engaged and the patterns of nuclear weapons politics over a long period of time. This pushed me into looking at the structure of political opportunities.

How did you negotiate your own political views?

Ferree: I was asked a lot about what American feminist groups were like and what our government was doing. I found the comparisons useful as they forced me to clarify not only what I was seeing that was different from "at home" but to try to figure out why that would be. I was also amused by the self-evidentness with which some German feminists said that "Americans are ahead of us" in feminism as in other democratic politics back in the early '80s—a trope that totally disappeared by the late '90s.

Rojas: Many antiwar activists advocate views I do not agree with. For

example, some openly advocate socialism, a philosophy I do not share. However, I do not let these disagreements affect my research. My view is that I am a social scientist… I choose research topics because they present an opportunity to test or explore a theory of human behavior. Furthermore, I am a bit of an optimist. Even if I disagree with some antiwar protesters, I do believe that they want a fair and just world….

Alexander: In fact, my own sympathy with the revolution made me sensitive to the rationales underlying its opponents. I was fascinated to learn of the Mubarak regime's extensive ideological work and of its initial appeal.

Clough: Politically I thought I was an anarchist when I began the project, but by the end I was far less certain. Many of the anarchists engaged in direct action protest in the U.S. would call themselves "green anarchists," which designates a certain environmental philosophy that is very critical of civilization, modernity, science, etc. I always thought I was more of a libertarian socialist or "red anarchist," and there were few others of my ilk in the group. I agreed with some of the commitments held by most group members and disagreed with other commitments they held in common. However, I tried not to engage in too many arguments… the group really wanted to focus on what we all had in common as anti-authoritarians.

Caren and Gaby: This idea was more relevant for our research on white nationalists. Exploring the complicated conspiracy theories of some of those folks is fascinating. In a way, it would be tougher to navigate if white nationalists were less extreme or more influential. Their claims can be so incredible… that it is hard to take them seriously. On the other hand, when people associated with the site are tied to violent bias crimes that make the national news, it is a reminder that this about more than keyboard fantasies.

Meyer: My politics shaped my questions, but not my answers. I remained in contact with some of the people I'd worked with for a long time, and gave copies of my first book to people I'd interviewed or

admired. Over a very long period of time, some of these relationships have eroded with distance and new political issues. But for my first project, I was trying to do double-duty politics and research at the same time. I think this is pretty common and far from optimal. At the personal level, the double-duty dream really didn't work; …at the aggregate level, we have much less material on some movements, often those staged by people most academics don't like.

There are a couple of serious challenges in being an engaged activist in a particular movement while trying at the same time to do academic work. First, your field of vision as an activist necessarily highlights the present dilemma; you have to be concerned with the particular [and] it's harder to see the general, much less theory. Second, in my activist life, I spent a lot of time trying to frame issues in ways that were convincing, and this often meant negotiating slogans and simplifying points of view. There was stuff that went on backstage (nothing nefarious in my experience) that I didn't want to discuss with a broader public—or even academics. Finally, in deciding to work for a nuclear freeze resolution, I made a commitment to advocate, which sometimes superseded my commitments as an analyst. Even when I separated my analytical foci from the advocacy positions I took, academic audiences didn't always recognize this … it wasn't helpful to the way my work was read, nor to my career.

How did your research project evolve during your time in the field?

Ferree: I was already in the field studying feminist institutionalization when boom, the Berlin Wall fell and unification began. I had to totally shift gears and start a second, simultaneous research project on the East German feminism in the streets while still keeping up data collection on the West (for which I had gotten the research grant). I just talked and talked and talked to everybody and rode the S-Bahn back and forth.., My perspective changed more by getting a view of the East that… was my own. …I also began to positively value my outsider role more, and

didn't want to be mistaken for German (my American accent became an asset, to my surprise).

Rojas: Initially, our research focused on organizational networks. We asked questions like: "What organizations recruited you to be here today?" Later, as our project grew, we had data on many facets of the movement. Right now, we can study how the movement changes over time, the careers of activists, and how the antiwar movement relates to the Democratic Party. By collecting a massive amount of data on the antiwar movement, we can study it from multiple perspectives.

Alexander: The main challenge in doing such a media ethnography of a revolution is to satisfy yourself that you are not simply getting what journalists think, but what actually happened on the ground from the point of view of participants themselves. I became more confident about this as I read literally hundreds of statements, including interviews with Egyptians across a wide range of political, economic, and religious fields. There was an impressive similarity, as well, in the journalistic descriptions of motives and relations among the revolutionary leaders and followers in English, French, Italian, and Arabic. I looked closely at Al Jazeera broadcasts, mostly in English but also in Arabic. I also made extensive use of the Facebook pages created by the revolutionaries to grow their movement inside Egypt and to increase support for it outside. Finally, I had access to raw field notes from an Egyptian sociologist who participated in the movements, and my account was also read by two other journalists who were there.

Did your relationship with the group continue after the research was complete?

Ferree: It still continues. I can't seem to stop doing comparative analysis as both movements change and I try to figure out why and how by talking to activists there. I get invited often to Germany and other European countries to present such comparative arguments. I learn a lot every time from the question (and challenge) period, and I try to keep

refining my own analysis from what I get back! But I am privileged that my research is “on” people who are sharing the kinds of feminist and academic venues in which I am most at home anyway, so there is no real reason to disengage.

…I am not now—and never was—a crusader, but my commitment to feminist causes is both broad and deep and so it bubbles up in academic and non-academic settings. But unlike some who really get deeply engaged and put in passionate hours and years with a particular political organization, I tend to stay on the margins of the fray by inclination. This a temperment that allows an easier connection between scholar and activist roles than would be the case for those with more focused dedication to one organizational way of working for a cause.

Rojas: Our antiwar research continues and we maintain a good relationship with antiwar movement leaders. Our work has been discussed in the media, such as NPR, the *Wall Street Journal*, and ABC News. We have also had discussions with both the movement leadership and rank-and-file activists about our research. We believe that sociological research should be accessible to the public and we welcome comments and criticism.

Alexander: I spent five days in Egypt this last September following up on the post-revolution. I interviewed some 25 people who represented great diversity.

Clough: I had planned on staying involved, but by the time the demonstrations were over, the differences between myself and most of the group had become quite clear \. I did participate in a lawsuit for two years after the protests as a representative of the RNC Welcoming Committee and we were eventually successful in our action against the city of St. Paul. The settlement money has been given to several Twin Cities radical projects, but the majority of my cut is going to an anarchist free space in south Minneapolis.

Why do we need sociological research on social movements when they are covered in detail not only by mainstream media, but also by diverse actors such bloggers and Twitter users?

Ferree: For me at least, it is the historical dimension that adds the most to my understanding of the how and why of specific present developments. People can tell you a lot about their own and their organizations' histories without being aware of how these legacies continue to be important to them. It's the variation among the cases (within an organization or a country or between them) that is most informative to me, both by what it includes and what it leaves out. Most people focus just on their own specific experience or on a single site or moment; that leaves a lot of the important relationships out.

Rojas: Social scientists do one very important thing that the mass media and blogosphere do not do: we systematically collect data to support or reject theories of how the social world works. Here is one example from my research. For many years, critics of the antiwar movement have claimed that protesters were driven by partisan motivations. People only protested the war because it was initiated by a Republican president. In 2011, we published a paper showing a partisan demobilization after the Obama election. That paper was based on an analysis of 5,000 surveys showing that Democrats were a much smaller fraction of an antiwar protest after the Obama inauguration. During the Bush presidency, about 50% of protesters were Democrats. That number dropped to 20% after Obama's inauguration. What some critics in the media suspected, social science research was able to test with hard data.

Alexander: We need to get beyond the self-understandings of actors themselves, even as we use these understandings as a starting point for our own cultural sociological explanations.

Clough: Studying social movements provides a way for theory to follow action rather than attempting to guide it from above (as it were). The biggest problem with so much radical theory of the past century and a

half has been the presumption of intellectuals that they should tell the working class, the colonized, minorities, whoever, how they should run their struggle. Instead, keeping an empirical focus on actual movements keeps theory in touch and researchers honest about what is happening and how that could influence what might be a possible future… So, I think it is important to foster a pragmatic humility in terms of utility, but cultivate an optimistic intentionality nevertheless.

Caren and Gaby: I wish there were more people in the blogosphere doing social movements research. If there were someone like Nate Silver who produced an interesting quantitative finding about contemporary social movements every week, our field would be better off.

Meyer: Journalism and blogs provide boatloads of raw material, but thorough research on patterns of engagement and quiescence are quite something else.

Any advice for the next generation of people setting out to research social movements?

Ferree: Read widely and not only about "your" movement or historical moment. First, there are many alternative paths that could be taken by events or organizations and yet only some of them will seem possible or desirable to actors in the moment. Moments matter – it was important that Tiananmen Square was a few months before the Leipzig protests (important to both the police and the protesters), and that Egypt came before Wisconsin. Follow those specific tropes and references to see what is thought possible or not. Look beyond the present to try to figure out what participants in the movement imagine for the future – what frightens them and what emboldens them. Meanings matter as much as material resources, and we lost sight of that for a while. Second, knowing how people NOT in the movement see it as well as how participants view their own actions and others' reactions is important since that perception produces the context, in which actions and claims will either resonate or

not and make practical headway – or radicalize the actors who are not being heard. Media coverage is thus important for what it doesn't say and what it distorts, not just as a reflection of what happened or was said.

Rojas: First, exploit the landscape. I think we are seeing a great awakening of social movements, from the Arab Spring, to the Tea Party, to Occupy Wall Street. Study these movements while they happen. Don't be timid, embrace the world. Second, I would urge social movement researchers to think big and be ambitious. We have amazing tools for research – surveys, ethnography, computer based data collection (i.e., "scraping" web sites). Use these tools to forge the next generation of research.

Alexander: I would be careful, in fact, of the tendency of social movement research to tell the story only from the perspective of the movement itself. One needs also to focus on the broader public sphere toward whose transformation the movement aims, which means looking closely at the mediascape that surrounds the movement events.

Clough: Be honest, be humble, be careful. Things are serious right now and if you screw up you could really get people into trouble. This was hammered home for me when "intelligence" officers from the local Sheriff's Department came to my house and threatened to have me kicked out of school if I didn't turn state's witness. I told them to talk to my lawyer and haven't heard from them since, but their interest in my work underscored the potential of social movement research to be used for the suppression of dissent. I think that those of us studying social movements need to always keep this in mind.

Caren and Gaby: I think the rise of big data from places like Google, Twitter and Facebook means that sociologists in general will have to be able to develop a whole new toolkit for collecting and analyzing data. The workflow for downloading and analyzing a 1,200-person survey is very different from that of downloading and analyzing two million

Facebook posts or comments. One of the more interesting trends is the rise of quantitative electoral analysis by non-political scientists… at their best, the models test both political science theories and conventional wisdom about campaigns and elections. They help influence the media narrative. If there was a group of activists doing the same for protests, social movement scholarship would be more relevant and more influential.

Meyer: I always urge people who want to study social movements to pick questions that are really questions to them–not the chance to make arguments. If you desperately want to know the answer to something, you'll be rigorous in reviewing what existing research says and ways to find out if it's true or not. This means staying away from questions where you already have a vested interest in a particular answer. I think this is far more important than a rigid commitment to a particular method or analytical strategy.

By the way, it's also important to pick a question you care about because research is hard and everything takes a long time. Remembering that you're searching for the truth really helps in fortifying yourself for the effort.

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