

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Social Movement Studies on 24 September 2012, available online:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2012.725998>

States and Social Movements

(Political Sociology Series)

Hank Johnston.

Cambridge, Polity Press, 2011, ISBN 9780745646268 (hardback), £50.00, ISBN 9780745646275 (paperback), £15.99, vi + 230 pp., indices.

This book examines how the development of the state-based system has been paralleled by the emergence of social movements. Central is the idea that it is not possible to understand one without the other. This is premised on two related notions. First, “For the vast majority of the people for most of recorded time, the state was given and inevitable, like death and taxes.” (p.4) Secondly, “Against elite interests, [represented by the state] popular interests are given form and substance by collective action.” (p.3) The result is that wherever the state exists, opposition protest and collective action will develop. The purpose of the book is to examine the nature of this relationship and how it exists in differing socio-political contexts and over time.

The book moves from an examination of the origins of protest and the closeness of premodern states through to contemporary globalised manifestations. It examines and elaborates key aspects of social movement theory, weaving them into an overarching narrative. This demonstrates the normalization of protest alongside the consolidation of the institutions of state. This leads to the point that “Protest is a noninstitutional means of making claims or ameliorating grievances when state authorities, by limiting, ignoring, or closing off institutional channels of access are not responsive to

popular pressure.” (p.16) Social movements and protest represent the exercise of politics by other means, where standard channels are ineffective or unavailable.

The role of protest in repressive and non-democratic states is examined in Chapter Four. Free spaces, outside the control of the regime, provide opportunities for activists willing to risk repression to operate. The author identifies these spaces as identified as laying the ground for more diverse and direct forms of opposition. The capacity and willingness of the state to use repressive means to close down opposition features strongly in determining the character and scale of the free spaces that are permitted. Opportunities for dissent are far more constrained in totalitarian than authoritarian regimes, due to the former’s more complete control and use of terror to subdue the population. Developing an understanding of the nature of social movement activity under such regimes is becoming increasingly important, making this a useful overview.

At the extreme end of the state-social movement relationship sit revolutions. These events are significant and warrant attention as “revolutionary movements seek to replace the state, not simply influence it.” (p.136) Moving through the different theories of revolution, Johnston demonstrates how these eruptions of discontent are social movements, at the sharp end. Similar to social movements under non-democratic regimes, revolutionary situations are shaped by the capacity of the state. Where the state lacks capacity and is seen as illegitimate, challenges can move beyond simple opposition to comprehensive and sustained questioning of its authority. Further consideration could have been given to the link between social

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movement and revolutionary movements; specifically what conditions lead a social movement to escalate and seek to replace the state.

The issue of globalization and its impact on the state and social movements is examined in the final chapter. The author notes that globalization presents a challenge to the state. With the spread of communication technologies social movements have begun to develop networks that operate at the international level. This is seen in the emergence of Transnational Social Movement Organizations, International Non-governmental Organizations, and Transnational Advocacy Networks (pp.182-88). The distinction between these organization types is blurred, leading to questions regarding their usefulness. The position of the state in the changing global system and how this has impacted the strategies of organizations operating at the international level could also have been explored in more detail.

States and Social Movements is a comprehensive introduction to how the relationship between these two key actors has evolved over time. The close analysis of the development of theories related to social movements is enlivened through rich details of actual social movement activities. A large volume of information is synthesised, making it accessible to readers seeking a way into the social movement studies field, while also providing new insights for more familiar readers.

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