**Transnational Social Movements and Peaceful Change**

Alejandro Milcíades Peña

**Abstract**

The chapter discusses the relationship between social movements and peaceful change. First, it reviews the way this relationship has been elaborated in IR constructivist and critical analyses, as part of transnational activist networks, global civil society, and transnational social movements, while considering the blind sides left by the dominant treatment of these entities as positive moral actors. Second, the chapter reviews insights from the revolution and political violence literature, a literature usually sidelined in IR debates about civil society, in order to cast a wider relational perspective on how social movements participate in, and are affected by, interactive dynamic processes that may escalate into violent outcomes at both local and international levels.

**Keywords**

social movements, peaceful change, global civil society, revolution, political violence, reformism, radicalization

As indicated in other chapters, the concept of peaceful change emerged in the first part of the nineteenth century as both a policy and an intellectual challenge to the rather intuitive Clausewitzian vision of foreign affairs, wherein war and coercion are the ultimate mechanisms to settle international disputes. Nonetheless, the enduring relevance of power politics, both throughout the Cold War and in its unipolar aftermath, and nowadays with a return to multipolar competition, has meant that peaceful change debates remain largely associated with a search for safeguards against the “Thucydides trap,” the dangers that emerge when a rising power challenges a ruling one (Allison [2014](#Ref1)), and for ways out of what John Mearsheimer ([2001](#Ref68)) called “the tragedy of great power politics,” the never-ending cycle of order, distrust, and conflict. As noted by T. V. Paul in the introductory chapter to this volume, this has meant that across these discussions lingered a state-centric mindset, concerned primarily with systemic questions regarding power transitions and accommodation, and secondarily with regional- or state-level developments such as the creation of collective security schemes or the transformation of antagonistic state identities. Unfortunately, this treatment left little space to engage with social movements, given the scarce attention granted by mainstream international relations (IR) approaches to phenomena understood to be operating at the societal level. This disregard is notable as much as problematic, given that historians and sociologists have long linked social movements and collective mobilization not only with peaceful changes in domestic societies but also with major transformations in world politics, from the spread of nationalism, democracy, and human rights to the dissolution of empires and superpowers (Hobsbawn [2003](#Ref50); Tilly [2004a](#Ref98)).

Conveniently, a recent archaeology of the concept provides an alternative conceptualization that facilitates the reintroduction of social movements into these discussions. Looking at foundational debates during the interwar years, Kristensen ([2019](#Ref62)) distinguished the minimalist “negative” position of peaceful change held by early realists, concerned with finding ways of managing revisionist powers and avoiding war, from more substantive “positive” views, interested in the consensual, legal, and normative changes conducive not only to peace but also to justice and long-term cultural progress. This position included representatives of what at the time was viewed as an emerging “science of internationalism,” in which international reform and peace would follow from the strengthening of “international bonding” via, for example, the organization of international congresses, the development of international scientific publications, and the promotion of interactions between private international groups (Davies [2017](#Ref20)). Though these precursor internationalists held different ideologies, overall they supported a modernist vision of human and political progress in pursuit of what Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine called “the civilized community of all the world” (quoted in Davies [2017](#Ref20), 894)—a project represented at that time by the League of Nations.[[1]](#endnote-2)

This “idealist” internationalist vision, wherein war and conflict could be not only prevented but even eradicated through the alignment of the right ideas, the right values, and the right institutions, would inform many subsequent, even if indirect, elaborations of positive and maximalist peaceful change within the broad church of IR constructivism, from the functionalist “Working Peace System” of David Mitrany and the societal solidarism of the English school, to the Kantian complementarities across IR liberal and liberal institutionalist arguments, to Habermasian models of global democratic governance, to mention a few (Long [1993](#Ref65); Chandler [2004](#Ref14); Linklater [2005](#Ref64)). Whether through international organization, hegemonic leadership, epistemic communities, socialization, or communicative action, these approaches accepted two major caveats in relation to change in world politics: that “the transformation of domestic and transnational social values, interests and institutions” shapes the sources of state insecurity (Moravcsik [1997](#Ref71), 547), meaning that realist traps and tragedies can be resolved at the societal level; and that the “convergence on knowledge, norms, and belief is a prelude to convergence on institutions and processes of governance” (Keohane [2002](#Ref57), 212), meaning that peaceful ordering mechanisms will work better the more certain ideas and values are shared.

It should not be surprising then that the last two decades of the twentieth century constituted a propitious moment for the intellectual consolidation of positive conceptions of change in global politics (Kratochwil [1998](#Ref61)). The negotiated end of the Cold War, the remarkably peaceful dissolution “from below” of the Soviet bloc, and the ordered democratic transitions of many Latin American and Eastern European nations legitimated internationalist visions of world ordering in which it was not simply a state that had come out victorious, but a system of (liberal) ideas as harbingers of the closing of history.[[2]](#endnote-3) This paradigmatic transition, wherein both war and peace were seen as cultural constructs, influenced IR’s theoretical and empirical interests for the actors and processes shaping the peaceful preferences and identities of states and individuals and steering systemic and unit-level change in peaceful directions. It is as part of this transition that mentions of social movements started becoming more frequent—even if still rather oblique—in the IR literature as part of arguments on economic interdependence, the retreat of the state, and the growing influence of transnational nonstate actors in areas such as peace promotion, environmental protection, and human rights. While these arguments by liberal, constructivist, and critical scholars contributed to expanding the realist horizon of peace and change beyond balance of power, absolute gains, and regulatory regimes, they nonetheless maintained a normative perspectivism in which civil society actors, and particularly social movements, were peaceful agents by definition: a communitarian force underpinning cross-border collaboration and deliberation or resisting the encroachment of state power (or market rationality) on society, in both cases through peaceful contributions and modes of operation.

This chapter considers that this internationalist perspectivism has clouded more nuanced considerations regarding the variegated values and aims social movements can support, as well as the different roles they can play in peaceful, and not so peaceful, change processes in world politics. To make this case, the chapter takes issue with a primordial consideration in the mind of early proponents of the notion, both in negative and positive variants, which became somewhat lost in subsequent discussions. In the context of the 1930s, peaceful change debates were not only preoccupied with alternatives to war and great power realpolitik, but also with preventing revolutions: rapid and violent change. The resulting conceptualization of peaceful change was therefore “inherently reformist—both anti-conservative and anti-revolutionary” (Kristensen [2019](#Ref62), 9), and cast in opposition to radical internationalist visions in Marxist, communist, and anticolonial thinking. IR’s late engagement with social movements, developed largely during a particular end-of-history moment “when the very possibility of revolution was rendered ideologically absurd” (Smith [2010](#Ref96), 51), somewhat accommodated to this conception, resulting in a treatment of transnational social movements as reformist, at most emancipatory, actors.

However, by engaging with disciplines that followed a different intellectual path, it is possible to reveal a more open, dynamic, and relational perspective of social movements and their roles in processes of change and conflict. The chapter has two main sections. The first takes issue with the “*idealistic* versions by scholars in the maximalist/globalist traditions” (Paul 2020), in which social movements are seen as offering normative guidance across borders and sustaining a more civilized world society. The second part critiques and expands this optimistic treatment by drawing insight from literatures that unpack the dynamics of political contention, violence, and revolution, pointing out how social movements intersect with them.

**Conveyor Belts, Emancipation, and Peace**

An initial difficulty that shaped IR’s engagement with social movements early on was a general ambiguity regarding what they are and how they operate. Charles Tilly (2004, 7), one of social movements’ most influential researchers, apologized for the inflation of the term, which ranged from loose definitions referring to any form of popular collective action, to versions in which social movements are identified with specific civil society actors, to Tilly’s definition of these as the synthesis of authority-oriented campaigning, claim-making performances, and public displays of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment. Other sociologists saw movements as networks of collective recognition and shared identity, linked by patterns of sustained interaction that could be more or less centralized and more or less formal, and that oscillated over time (Diani [2003](#Ref25)).

This dynamic and networked character of social movements, with unclear boundaries, membership, and agency, presented a difficulty to the conventional actor-oriented materialist epistemology of mainstream IR (Shaw [1994](#Ref91); Walker [1994](#Ref101)), so that by the 1980s little attention was paid to transnational actors in general, and even less to transnational social movement actors (Huntington [1973](#Ref51); Charnovitz [1997](#Ref15); Davies [2007](#Ref19)). Similarly, political sociology and political science scholarship understood social movements to be largely situated in the domestic realm, not only as contentious action was understood in terms of localized grievances and political opportunity structures, but also because basic mechanisms of resource mobilization and identity building were viewed as losing efficiency across large distances (Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink [2002](#Ref58)). Analyses of environmental movements across the United States and Europe, particularly active during the late Cold War period, were often discussed in comparative terms (Meyer [1999](#Ref69)), while longer historical views of international movements, such as antislavery, pacifist, and religious movements, were a matter for historians and specialists (Haynes [2001](#Ref49); Ceadel [1996](#Ref12)).

The recognition of the role of transnational civil society actors in global change processes is mainly a post–Cold War development, linked to structural changes in world politics such as growing democratization, economic integration, converging values, and the proliferation of transnational institutions. In this context, much of the seminal constructivist work exploring the transnational actions of civil society actors saw these as emerging from and reinforcing positive peaceful change (Smith, Chatfield, and Pagnucco [1997](#Ref95); Simmons [1998](#Ref92)). The role of transnational advocacy networks promoting principled causes, ideas, and values across the world—in realms such as human rights; democracy; environmental protection; the regulation of warfare; and the protection of women, children, and minorities—was viewed in tandem with peaceful mechanisms such as persuasion, social emulation, deliberation, and internalization, seeking “to change the utility functions of other players to reflect some new normative commitments” (Finnemore and Sikkink [1998](#Ref34), 914; Keck and Sikkink [1998](#Ref56)) and “teaching governments what is appropriate in world politics” (Price [1998](#Ref79), 639).[[3]](#endnote-4)

While these studies mentioned social movements, these appeared mainly as local groups seconding the actions of more institutionalized and resourceful international actors. Movements and local activist groups were part of the conveyor belt enacting the transnational diffusion of norms, upward and downward. As such, their role was summarized by Brysk ([1993](#Ref10), 261):

Social movements that lack conventional power can turn their weakness into strength by projecting cognitive and affective information to form international alliances. This information resonates in issue-specific international regimes that include non-governmental organizations, and foreign governments and mobilizes “reference publics” through diffuse channels (especially the media). Once mobilized, the international system gives social movement resources, protection and more information.

By the 2000s, references to civil society actors as more than links in transnational activist chains became more frequent, entangled now with debates about neoliberalization, liberal cosmopolitanism, and the consolidation of a global public domain facilitated by the new affordances of internet technologies. On the one side, the liberal-constructivist scholarship pointed to a global civil society defined by peaceful discourses of “human rights, sustainable development, poverty alleviation, transparency, climate justice, green radicalism, and human security” (Dryzek [2012](#Ref27), 114), as the social partner in a new architecture of global governance, one with greater space for consensus- and truth-seeking interactions and for the participation of less materially powerful actors (Risse [2000](#Ref81); Scholte [2002](#Ref89); Kaldor [2003](#Ref54); Ruggie [2004](#Ref85)).[[4]](#endnote-5)

At the same time, a more socialized view of the international system enabled more confident treatments of social movements as transnational actors in their own right. Admitting that these were “the most difficult and rare form of transnational collective action” (Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink [2002](#Ref58), 8), scholars accepted that certain movements had somehow formalized into permanent networks of social initiative identifying with global causes and discourses, capable of coordinating contentious campaigns across more than one country (Smith, Chatfield, and Pagnucco [1997](#Ref95); Batliwala [2002](#Ref3); Della Porta and Tarrow [2005](#Ref24)). The anti-nuclear-proliferation movement, led initially by international networks of scientists and intellectuals, which mutated during the Cold War into a transnational peace and disarmament movement (often criticized in the West as dupes for the Soviet Union); the transnational feminist and environmental networks targeting UN and intergovernmental conferences during the 1990s; and a variety of state and nonstate actors constituting the global human rights movement became examples of said transnational movements (Evangelista [1999](#Ref30); Moghadam [2009](#Ref70)).[[5]](#endnote-6) In addition, a more critical literature of Marxist, feminist, and post-structuralist inspiration argued that some social movements were transnational not because of the reach of their campaigns and networks, but because they contributed to transnational emancipatory and identity-building processes, symbolically confronting “the ideological infrastructure of globalization” (Falk [1998](#Ref33), 102) and the underlying structures of the international system, “state sovereignty and the capitalist mode of production” (Colás [2002](#Ref17), 86). Here, the most salient case was the decentered networks of activists, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and grassroots movements, many from the global South, integrating the global justice movement, which during the early 2000s targeted the summits of multilateral institutions with mass demonstrations and the organization of counter-summits such as the World Social Forum (Eschle [2001](#Ref29); Juris [2004](#Ref53); J. Smith [2008](#Ref94); Moghadam [2009](#Ref70)).

While there was some recognition that not all social movements were “good” or pursued inclusive objectives, the dominant assumption was that most were peaceful change actors. Recent studies about the global Far Right, while concerned with the success of illiberal parties and the spread of “reactionary internationalism,” reckon that most of these groups operate via outrage mobilization, dissuasive rhetorical and “soft” confrontational techniques, and electoral populism, not organized violence—though this could be debated (Bob [2012](#Ref7); Drolet and Williams [2018](#Ref26); De Orellana and Michelsen [2019](#Ref73)). Transnational social movements pursued change in positive terms and occasionally faced repression, but overall, they were not violent. This treatment has remained popular, extending to the anti-austerity and anti-elite movements that emerged after the 2008 economic crisis and to current climate change campaigns, such as the #FridaysForFuture, which beyond their political or policy impact are praised for forming “a new cohort of citizens who will be active participants in democracy” (Castells [2015](#Ref11); Fisher [2019](#Ref35)).

**The Divide of Civil Society**

To a large extent this sanitized view of social movements in IR traces back, on the one hand, to liberal conceptions in which both democratic politics *and* political peace rest on patterns of civility and habits of association that antecede the state, and on the other hand, to Gramscian views of civil society as an oppositional force resisting cultural institutions of state power. Thus, in Tocquevillian and Putnamian approaches, it is the prepolitical nature of civil society that contributes to infuse the demos into the political body, a view that libertarians and anarchists take to the extreme in their utopia of free (and peaceful) civil communities (Chambers and Kopstein [2001](#Ref13); Rucht [2011](#Ref84)). In light of grassroots anticommunist movements in Eastern Europe, such Solidarity in Poland and Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, and human rights and pro-democracy movements contesting right-wing dictatorships in Latin America, this prepolitical conception mutated later into one in which popular forces were the basic democratic institution confronting state authoritarianism (Foley and Edwards [1998](#Ref37)). This second view approximated to the Gramscian view that the more organized sectors of civil society functioned as instruments of ideological domination and state power, meaning that any civil counterhegemonic resistance would have to come from actors operating on the margins of the political system—a view more inclusive of anti-imperial, radical, and antiglobalization movements with alternative conceptions of democracy or the economy, such as those often found in the Global South (Katz [2006](#Ref55)).

This sanitized view enabled distinguishing social movements in postindustrial societies—where with few exceptions (e.g., the Italian Brigatte Rose, the German Rote Armee Fraktion, and other separatist and nationalist organizations like the Basque ETA) by the 1980s the principal social movements were reformist, advocates of “nonviolent methods and social relations, adopting nonviolent action as a tactical choice and non-violence as a framing element, and cultivating a social critique of violence, from domestic violence to militarization and war” (Schock [2015](#Ref88), 6)—from movements in other parts of the world that still accepted the use of violence to pursue revolutionary ambitions. Schock ([2015](#Ref88), 10–12) indicates that this divide resulted in two scholarly traditions studying social movements and political change. The first, concerned with nonviolent action, adopted a more agent-centric, normative, and policy orientation, in which violence is considered as lacking both legitimacy and effectiveness to achieve political change. Thus, for Sharp ([2005](#Ref90), 16), nonviolent struggles were behind many of the major political transformations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

Higher wages and improved conditions were won. Oppressive traditions and practices were abolished. Both men and women won the right to vote in several countries in party by using this technique. Government policies were changed, laws repealed, new legislation enacted, and governmental reforms instituted. Invaders were frustrated and armies defeated. An empire was paralyzed, coups d’états thwarted, and dictatorships disintegrated.

Similarly, Lawrence and Chenoweth ([2010](#Ref63), 7) observe that “between 1900 and 2005, nonviolent resistance campaigns were nearly twice as likely to achieve full or partial success as their violent counterparts” even in struggles commonly linked with violence, such as anti-regime, anti-occupation, and self-determination campaigns, as nonviolent tactics were better at obtaining internal and external support and facilitated bargaining with authorities.[[6]](#endnote-7)

The second tradition, more structural, contextual, and scholarly oriented, focused instead on revolutions and broader processes of change in which violence and nonviolence emerged as part of a continuum of interactions and outcomes.[[7]](#endnote-8) That IR has somehow aligned with the former rather than with the latter is certainly odd and something Halliday ([2001](#Ref48), 694) considered “the great anomaly,” given the constitutive effects that revolutions have had on notions “of state, of security, and of the domestic-international relationship, but also in regard to the relative impact of ideas in international politics,” as well as the centrality of violence for traditional concerns of the discipline. Halliday deplored both the scant consideration of revolutions by realists and “the banal revolutionary verities, evident in much contemporary Marxism and post-Seattle anti-globalization rhetoric” in relation to the treatment of social movement politics (699).[[8]](#endnote-9) After the events of September 11, 2001, , the securitization of political violence further accentuated this anomalous exclusion of radical and violent change in IR, meaning that references to radical social movements and ideologies were treated from an expanded security and risk perspective and separated from mainstream discussions about global civil society and transnational movements (Beck [2002](#Ref4); Neumann [2003](#Ref72)).

As a result, IR’s engagement with social movements remained mired in two disciplinary biases: a progressive conception of social movements as normative and benevolent internationalist actors, and a reformist and nonviolent understanding of their mode of operation. Thus, Keck and Sikkink ([1998](#Ref56))’s work on advocacy networks in Latin America, representative of liberal constructivism, pays significant attention to social movements such as Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, and to transnational solidarity networks denouncing state authoritarianism and terrorism. But scarce attention is given to radical left-wing groups operating in the same context in the region—from the Peronist Montoneros in Argentina, to the Guevarist Tupamaros in Uruguay, and the Maoist Sendero Luminoso in Perú—against which much of the state repression of the time was directed. These groups were also social movements, partly with transnational origins and often with transnational links, pursuing visions of national and international change. Similarly, the critical scholarship, despite its emphasis on grassroots movements from the Global South, rarely discussed groups that pursued emancipation through violent means or that envisioned exclusive counterhegemonic goals, such as Islamic fundamentalists (Cox [1999](#Ref18); Evans [2011](#Ref32)). In fact, the typical example of a Global South counterhegemonic movement is the Mexican Zapatistas, a group that even if it maintained guerrilla symbolism, moved away from its Maoist/Guevarist origins and adopted nonviolent tactics and a democratic agenda, since 2017 participating in electoral politics.

Few works have tried to address these biases in the IR literature. With Tom Davies, a contributor to this handbook, we extended English school notions to claim that the reception of social movements in world politics follows from how their ideological programs interact with different world order structures (Peña and Davies [2019](#Ref76)). The basic idea is that movements with “revolutionist” objectives, seeking to radically alter basic values in world society, would have more difficulty than “rationalist” movements seeking to operate within an international society largely structured around liberal and reformist institutions. Thus, movements operating on issues of global governance, human rights, peace, and so forth, and seeking to influence policy, can be expected to be granted more space than radical transnational movements (i.e., religious extremists, radical environmentalists, anarchists) that challenge state boundaries, cultural identities, and established international and world society principles—so it is not unexpected that groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have found little solidarity in the international community and have met with highly violent responses from states. Conservative “realist” movements, on the other hand, even if they reject cosmopolitan values, can find solidarity from kindred state actors and even collaborate with each other, on the basis of their defense of national sovereignty and their rejection of common external threats, as seen among Euroskeptic and Islamophobic movements across Europe and the United States (Hafez [2014](#Ref44)). From this framework it is possible to envision wider patterns of conflict provoked by the intersection of world society and international society orders. For example, in medieval Europe the series of religious wars associated with the Protestant Reformation, a transnational revolutionist movement, occurred because (Catholic) Christianity was an ordering principle of European international system and society, as much as an identity in regional world society, enabling “pathways to conversion” from below as much as from above and the conflation of civil society and state-level conflict (Philpott [2000](#Ref78)).[[9]](#endnote-10)

In the next section, however, I draw insight from the revolution and political violence literature to center on the question of violence, seeking to relativize the treatment of social movements as positive peaceful change actors by elaborating a more dynamic view of change processes wherein principled intentions coexist with the interests and values of other actors and with the vicissitudes of power and conflict.

**Revolutions, Change, and Violence**

Long pointed out by realists, one of the problems of liberal idealism is that achieving the shared normative ground necessary for peaceful coexistence and reform is easier said than done. In his International Studies Association (ISA) presidential speech, Paul ([2017](#Ref75), 5) mentioned some of the practical problems that liberal approaches left unattended on the way to a civilized world community: “[H]ow can liberal states encourage-non liberal states to adopt liberal ideas without violence? Conversely, how can liberal states learn to live with non-liberal states while accepting they will remain illiberal? If integration efforts do not succeed, how can liberal states co-exist with non-liberal states?” These comments point to blind sides in progressive visions of internationalist reformism regarding how to treat those who refuse to learn the right values (or learn slowly)—reminiscent of the polemic statement by Rousseau that some may need to be forced to be free—as well as the challenges found when operating in complex environments populated by “instrumental actors relentlessly pursuing their interests, armed with a variety of sources of power” (Price [2008](#Ref80), 203), who may not be persuaded and could fight back. A brief and sweeping discussion of how the relationship between social movements and conflict is treated in the revolution and political violence literature sheds some light on these blind sides.

First and foremost, in this literature there is a conspicuous recognition that social movements are integral components of revolutions—that is, rapid processes of political change—and that they can make a direct, even if reactive, contribution to the emergence of violence. Quoting Trotsky, Goodwin ([2001](#Ref43), 9) mentions as one of the most defining features of a revolution “the direct interference of the masses,” leading him to a definition of “irregular, extra-constitutional, and sometimes violent changes in political regime and control of state power brought about by popular movements.” While there is a recognition that some social movements are revolutionary in terms of the magnitude of their goals and the means through which they seek to achieve them (Defronzo [2015](#Ref21), 10), over time the revolution literature came to accept that agent-centric explanations, focused on the goals and ideologies of the actors, as well as purely structural ones, elaborating the conditions of emergence of revolutionary moments, were incomplete without a problematization of “the complex unintended intermeshing of the various motivated actions of the differentially situated groups which take part” and “the interrelations of societies within dynamic international fields” (Skocpol [2005](#Ref93), 112).

Thus, revolutions are puzzling because they show dynamic “movement-like” qualities; some do not happen where they are expected, and others succeed where they are not. Moreover, the trajectory of revolutionary processes is hard to predict from initial conditions, evolving as dynamic and open processes in which localized events may acquire regime-altering dimensions—as with the mobilizations leading to German unification or more recently, the Arab Spring protests in the early 2010s. Many eventual revolutionary coalitions, which include diverse elite and civil society actors, may start with limited demands and ambitions but adopt radical positions later on; it is worth remembering that the coalition that overthrew the Iranian shah in the 1970s included business elites, Communist workers, anti-imperialist students, and moderate intellectuals, with Ayatollah Khomeini initially stating that clerics should not occupy office (Goldstone [2009](#Ref42)).

Recent revolution scholarship has theorized the relationship between civil society, revolution movements, and violence as an emergent process wherein multiple actors interplay, mutate, and change their positions, composition, and objectives over time. Goldstone (1998) argued that social movements and revolutions originate in similar mobilization processes but evolve differently, depending on the broader social environment configuring the relationship between civil society and other social and political actors, as well as on the way the state and these groups behave following their initial contentions. Hence, in this literature the behavior of “actual existing social movements” (Evans [2008](#Ref31), 285) is seen as shaped by processes and mechanisms that differ quite starkly from the moderate discursive and associational activities mentioned in the first section of this chapter. The central behavior is radicalization, a process usually initiated by state repression that drives the increasing escalation of conflict due to the adoption of violent stances by contenders (Della Porta [2018](#Ref23)). Authors have identified a number of factors contributing to violent escalation. On the more general side, the level of access to institutionalized politics and the level and type of state repression, including timing and targeting, are frequently mentioned as key contextual variables (Hafez and Wiktorowicz [2004](#Ref45)). Lawrence and Chenoweth ([2010](#Ref63)) point to other contextual factors such as state weakness, elite manipulation, and the presence of marked ethnonational differences, arguing that sudden power shifts at domestic or international levels, such as changes in leadership or institutional guarantees, generate incentives for the adoption of aggressive strategies by competing social movements and elite groups—as happened within many African nations following the withdrawal of European powers and in multiethnic states like Yugoslavia following the death of Tito (Schmidt [2013](#Ref87)). As noted by Foley and Edwards ([1996](#Ref36), 48), the “paradox of civil society” is that for social actors to behave democratically (and peacefully), they require a democratic state, and a strong and responsive one; in other political environments, alternative civil society behaviors may materialize in which “even Putnam’s choral societies and bowling leagues—even nuns and bishops—may become ‘subversive.’”

As radicalization advances, other escalation mechanisms can kick in, such as polarization, opportunity/threat spirals, and intramovement competition, which result in the distancing of contending positions, the sidelining of moderates within revolutionary coalitions, and organizational competition within social movement milieus and families, seeking to outbid each other for resources and support (Bosi, Demetriou, and Malthaner [2014](#Ref8); Della Porta [2018](#Ref23)). In this context, activists find it easier to generate injustice frames that legitimize violence, contributing to just war and arms-race logics wherein “each side escalates its violent contention as a defensive measure while viewing opponent actions as offensive and provocative, thereby reinforcing perceptions about the need for continued violence” (Hafez and Wiktorowicz [2004](#Ref45), 71). This also increases the chances of further tensions within civil society and the eventual emergence of radicalized countermovements, as happened for example in Northern Ireland between Unionist and Loyalists groups; in Colombia between the FARC and the paramilitaries; and among the different sectarian militias in civil conflicts in countries like Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria (Della Porta [2008](#Ref22)).

Radicalization dynamics are mediated by cognitive, emotional, and “nonrelational diffusion” mechanisms that differ from the positive expectations associated with the collaborative and deliberative benefits associated with civil society. For example, authors like Petersen ([2011](#Ref77)) demonstrate that social movement actors can use emotions strategically in pursuit of both nonviolent and violent aims. Much of his analysis of the conflict dynamics during the dissolution of Yugoslavia underlines how political entrepreneurs and social movement actors mobilized rooted feelings of resentment, stigma, and fear among local communities to stir up violent sentiments, induce the radicalization of militants, and legitimize the commitment of atrocities. Insurgent groups, such as Albanian rebels in South Serbia and Macedonia, escalated violence to encourage repression by Serbian forces, seeking to encourage (successfully) the intervention of Western countries in their support. Similarly, Weyland ([2012](#Ref102)) and Hale ([2013](#Ref46)) have argued that the rapid cascading of Arab Spring protests responded not so much to coordinated transnational activism but to heuristic shortcuts facilitated by the reach of social media—shortcuts that amplified demonstration effects and inspired emulation and that resulted in overconfidence and the minimization of risks by activists in countries as different as Tunisia and the Gulf monarchies.

These examples also indicate that mass mobilization can perform indirect “signaling” functions that may contribute to escalation. For example, violent disruption is often used by activist groups to lower the fear of participation among bystanders and reveal the limits of state power, confronting authorities with the “dictator’s dilemma” of whether to increase repression and face backlash or to moderate and look weak—which may also incentivize further contention and escalation (Francisco [2005](#Ref38); Johnston [2014](#Ref52)). At the same time, the level of social turmoil, as well as the excessive use of repression, can signal to other elites (and external actors) the level of power or legitimacy of incumbent authorities, contributing to potential elite competition and defection (Trejo [2014](#Ref100)). In turn, patterns of elite defection, polarization, and mass mobilization intersect to condition the direction revolutionary radicalization may take, particularly if relevant elites such as security forces defect, as well as whether the goals of the emerging revolutionary coalition remain narrow (i.e. the removal of the incumbent) or are broadened. At the same time, even if the toppling of an incumbent is achieved relatively early on, this power shift could incentivize additional violence, as “all kinds of behaviors that had been suppressed under the old regime may burst forth in the new air of freedom” (Goldstone [2009](#Ref42), 23). In this situation, variables such as the degree of difference among members of the revolutionary coalition, the chances of survival of the post-revolutionary regime, and last but not least, the intervention of other states and foreign actors, can contribute to steering relatively peaceful contentious mobilizations into more problematic trajectories.[[10]](#endnote-11)

The particular emphasis this literature puts on state intervention during social mobilization illuminates the darker side of the foreign patronage of transnational activism. As pointed out by Halliday ([1999](#Ref47), 20), “revolutions are international, or they are nothing.” Many revolutionary movements, from pan-Slavism and pan-Arabism to Bolivarianism, al-Qaeda, and the global justice movement, in addition to a myriad of nationalist ones, are transnational not only because they emerge as responses to transnational grievances but because they aspire to change patterns of international ordering and power, be they Ottoman rule, “Yanqui” imperialism, or Western neoliberal hegemony. Subsequently, not only do revolutionary actors and regimes often attempt to export change, producing responses by other states and groups beyond their borders, but external state intervention is a primary variable conditioning different outcomes within a varied “postrevolutionary suite,” ranging from civil and international war to counterrevolution, revolutionary terror, and renewed radicalism (Goldstone [2009](#Ref42)). Again, the evolution of Arab Spring protests in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen provide recent and ongoing examples of transnational escalation dynamics, with the former resulting in a counterrevolutionary coup after the election of a Muslim Brotherhood president and the latter three in complex hybrid civil/international war scenarios involving an array of state and nonstate actors. For this reason, Goldstone lists among the conditions for a peaceful color revolutionary movement the absence of external pressures associated with internal or external war (2009, 30).

Hence, while up to the 2000s these transnational collaborations were often discussed under the peaceful mantle of democracy promotion, state building, and humanitarian intervention, the last two decades serve as a reminder that states can and do use social movements to promote their interests and prevent change (Risse and Babayan [2015](#Ref82)). From the United States covertly supporting white groups during the Russian Civil War (and Mujahedeen fighters during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan), to International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War and Soviet (and Cuban) support for national liberation movements across the Third World, to the connections Iran and Russia maintain with movements such as Hezbollah or nationalist militias in the Donbass, states have a long history of sponsoring social movements as proxies during change processes. Not surprisingly, Western support for pro-democracy and nationalist groups across the post-communist world and the Middle East (McFaul [2007](#Ref66); McKoy and Miller [2012](#Ref67)), whether direct or indirect, has contributed to the development of new “diffusion-proofing” strategies by threatened regimes. These strategies operate by depriving movements from gaining mobilizing resources, for example by restricting foreign funding of local civil society or co-opting influential constituencies (media owners, youth groups, business elites), or by convoluting the public domain, for example by promoting pro-regime countermovements, such as the Russian Nashi and pro-China groups in Hong Kong (Christensen and Weinstein [2013](#Ref16); Koesel and Bunce [2013](#Ref59); Yuen and Cheng [2017](#Ref103)).[[11]](#endnote-12)

Through this brief discussion, the relationship between social movements and change arises as less normative and optimistic, and indeed more uncertain, but more open in terms of the trajectories social movements may follow within social and political change processes. Social movements can indeed perform nonviolent reformist roles in accordance with maximalist expectations, contributing to civilizing society from below. But they may not, not only due to their ideological and strategic preferences, but also because the pursuit of change does not happen in a vacuum but in complex and often adversarial conditions, in which this pursuit is often challenged and opposed and may acquire violent features.

It is interesting how the issues of violence and time relate to the distinction between reformist and revolutionary change, insofar as violence has been thought of as a way of accelerating (or reducing) the pace of change. The “peace of reformism” can be thought to follow from a certain confidence that even if slowly, change will occur. For the Bolsheviks, confronting a highly repressive and entrenched system, this confidence was unreasonable, and the destruction of the state apparatus was necessary to guarantee change. On the other end, the organized nonviolent actions of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. eschewed violence in favor of stretching the temporal horizon of civil struggle, considering that change would come by the erosion of the ideas and values sustaining political authority. In contemporary “movement societies,” in which protesting has become the conventional repertoire by which social movements ask democratic authorities to bring about change, violence is generally the domain of small groups that reject the pace and rules of democratic politics (Goldstone [2004](#Ref41)).

It is then a curious feature of the mass protest movements appearing in the 2010s, digitally enabled, more horizontal, and less ideologically organized, such as the Occupy movement, anti-elite demonstrations, or anti-climate-change groups such as Extinction Rebellion, that they seem to reject both the gradualism of institutionalized politics, demanding rapid change, and the revolutionary intent of accelerating change through violence (Bennett [2012](#Ref5); Krastev [2014](#Ref60)). While skeptical observers like Krastev believe this ambivalence risks turning social movements into fleeting and even irresponsible eruptions of civil energy—in which “like elections, protests serve to keep revolutions, with its message of a radically different future, at an unbridgeable distance” (2014, 17)—more optimistic ones such as Rosanvallon ([2008](#Ref83)) envision a new role for them, not as moral or revolutionary agents but as “negative democracy” guardians who veto the direction and speed of change. Moreover, there is a growing concern regarding the unexpected effects of social media on patterns of social mobilization, political participation, and change. Initially hailed as a tool contributing to a more connected world community and positive peaceful change, social media’s communicational affordances—decentralizing the production and spread of information while facilitating the formation of diffused social networks—are now seen as reinforcing populist logics and amplifying the resonance of simple, flatter, movement-like contentious frames, better mobilized by right-wing and nativist forces (Bennett, Segerberg, and Knüpfer [2018](#Ref6); Gerbaudo [2018](#Ref40)). Whether the emergence of more populist but less revolutionary movements represents a positive development in terms of the prospects of peaceful change remains to be seen, though it is certainly something not envisioned by earlier internationalists.[[12]](#endnote-13)

**Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the relationship between social movements and peaceful change from a perspective that takes issue with the narrow manner in which social movements have been discussed in the IR literature: as positive normative actors acting in collaboration with other groups engaged in the (re)education of society or as emancipatory vanguards challenging the institutional and symbolic structures of power. The basic claim has been that early peaceful change conceptualizations and much of IR’s constructivist and critical engagement with social movements share a similar aversion to violent and rapid change and a similar faith that gradual reformist mechanisms are more effective and sustainable than power politics in keeping change processes peaceful. Somewhat ironically, the aversion interwar thinkers had for revolution and its dangers, with events in Soviet Russia fresh in the background, and the liberal optimism of post–Cold War IR, when that very revolutionary project dissolved, compounded to turn a cautionary consideration favoring institutional reform and political education into an analytical definition that cast civil society as its main vehicle. This chapter has questioned this bifurcation in relation to political violence and revolutionary processes and brought forward a more relational and fluid understanding of social movements’ relationships with their context, one that considers in greater detail the wider suite of interactions and mechanisms surrounding transnational social movement action and the variegated and often undesired trajectories these dynamic processes may follow.

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**Notes**

1. Otlet and La Fointaine were the founders of the Union of International Associations, the main repository of information on the work of global civil society. La Fontaine won the 1913 Nobel Peace Prize in recognition for his leadership in the European peace movement, while Otlet created the Universal Decimal Classification system adopted by libraries worldwide to classify knowledge fields. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. One of the most outstanding promoters of peaceful change of the period, Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev, declared during an interview in 1986: “It won’t even take an unprecedented stupidity or criminality for civilization to destroy itself. All it would take is to continue acting as mankind has acted for thousands of years—to keep relying on arms and force to settle international disputes. It is this tradition that we must ruthlessly demolish” (cited in Taubman [2017](#Ref97), 264). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. For these contributions, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, and one of its main activists, Jody Williams, received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997. The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons received it in 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Ruggie ([2004](#Ref85), 519) considered this domain “an institutionalized arena of discourse, contestation, and action organized around the production of global public goods.” [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. The International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985, received by the organization’s cofounders, Bernard Lown from the United States and Yevgeniy Chazov from the Soviet Union, while in 1995 Joseph Rotblat and the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs did so. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Peaceful conceptions of the function of civil society have also informed an important literature on conflict resolution and peacebuilding, which sees grassroots activities as a major factor supporting the transition from negative to positive peace arrangements and for the durability of cooperative interactions, mutual acceptance, and enhanced feelings of security among former enemies (Gawerc [2006](#Ref39); Paffenholz [2010](#Ref74)). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. The study of political violence has become a subfield in its own right. See Della Porta ([2008](#Ref22)). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Adding that “amidst the diffuse invocation of ‘emancipatory’ movements in IR scant attention is paid to the communist case and the lessons, negative and positive, of this. Yet if communism was not a social movement, it is hard to see what it was” (Halliday [2001](#Ref48), 698). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. As Philpott ([2000](#Ref78)) notes, that the Westphalian order emerged as a solution to the changes provoked by this transnational movement is evidence of the potential systemic impact social movements can have in world politics. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. This is not restricted to states. Other civil society groups, such as diasporas, can support conflict in their home countries (Brinkerhoff [2011](#Ref9)). For example, the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka depended on a considerable extent on money sent by the Tamil community abroad. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Between 2000 and 2012, the number of countries that passed restrictive NGO finance laws grew eightfold, from fewer than five to almost forty (Dupuy, Ron, and Prakash [2016](#Ref28), 301). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. I paraphrase Eric Schmidt, former Google CEO, who claimed that “despite seeing more revolutionary movements, we’ll see fewer revolutionary outcomes—fully realized revolutions resulting in dramatic and progressive political turnover” (Schmidt and Cohen [2013](#Ref86), 127). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)