

# **CJS Online**

## **Sociologists for a New Millennium**

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### **From Sociology to Protest (and Back): Journey on the Road to a Canadian Social Movements Studies**

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The choices I have made in my career as a Sociologist to date, and the medium-term road-map I have drawn for my future work, have two salient features. The first is an alignment of my main research questions with a longstanding admiration for social justice activism, and with my own involvement with various social movement networks. The second has been the use of ethnographic methods to understand the dynamics and outcomes of struggles against oppression.

The first Sociology classes I took as an undergraduate at McMaster University were what awakened me to the historically and internationally rooted disparities in wealth and power that give rise to many social movements. Particularly influential were the Sociology of Development courses I took with Rhoda Hassmann. Working as a research assistant for her book on human rights deepened my understanding not only of the major theoretical debates about rights, but how they can be violated on a massive scale. At McMaster, I started to attend events organized by campus groups in solidarity with opponents of regime violence in El Salvador just before the infamous assassination of six Jesuit priests there in 1989. All were university professors who had irritated recalcitrant elements of the elite, particularly within the military, by monitoring and disseminating information about human rights violations, publishing rigorous studies of agrarian inequalities, or mediating reconciliation between the armed insurgents and the government. In the weeks following this horrible event, I made the decision that I would one day do graduate-level field research on social movements in this country. Awed by the willingness of thousands of Salvadoreans to struggle for socio-economic justice and basic civil rights knowing this would make them targets of state terror, I wanted to understand the sources of this courage and commitment. A number of additional questions were added to this core concern as a result of my doctoral field research on the peasant movement in the mid-1990s, and my engagement with the social movement scholarship. How do party-movement relations influence protest? How does the extent of internal democracy in lower class movement organizations affect outcomes for different groups of participants? How do movements in developing countries maintain and regenerate themselves between periods of intense mobilization?

My early understanding of international development issues was also shaped by my encounter with works that analysed class formation from a macro-comparative perspective, such as Peter Worsley's *The Three Worlds*, and Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People without History*. My reading of Theda Skocpol's *States and Social Revolution* encouraged me to think about these issues together with the opportunities for, and consequences of, political rebellion. Under the doctoral supervision of Peter

Landstreet, Alan Simmons, and Liisa North, I was drawn to literature that takes a similar approach to the analysis of distorted development and insurgency in Latin America. Key in this regard were Timothy Wickham-Crowley's comparative analyses of Latin American guerrilla movements. I was also impressed by Jeffery Paige's *Agrarian Revolutions*, though I was unconvinced by his assertion that landowning peasants were inherently conservative. My thinking about social movements has also been influenced by scholars who have carved new theoretical space for the intersection of the subjective dimensions of movement participation with the structural forces that generate and constrain movements. For example, the pioneering work of Robert Benford and his collaborators on the discourse that activists use for mobilizing or demobilizing movements employs Goffman's concept of "framing" as the basis of a new paradigm in social movement studies. This literature was crucial in helping me to make sense of my dissertation data. More recently, I have found exemplars for research on peasant protest in Mark Edelman's anthropological study of the Costa Rican peasant movement, and Marshall Ganz's work on California Farm Workers. Both of these studies illustrate that it is possible for researchers to directly support and even help organize (as Ganz did) the movements they study, and to capture the richness of activists' biographies and personalities, while rigorously analysing their mobilization processes.

My research and reading on social movements have taught me that serious contributions to theories of peasant and other subaltern struggles cannot be made from an armchair. Nor is it sufficient to make sweeping, optimistic claims about movements whose causes we favour based on minimal or only descriptive primary research, or a scant review of other authors' primary studies. We need research that examines the internal dynamics of social movements. This entails interviewing not just national leaders of movements, but also the grassroots participants, who, in a Third World, rural setting, can be rather difficult to reach. Through the challenges I faced as a novice field researcher in rural El Salvador, I discovered that it also entails finding a way to listen to illiterate women who believe that their opinions are irrelevant. And it may also entail making critical observations about actors we like. In the peasant movement, I met dozens of the people I had been reading about and admiring for years, and found that some were scarred by civil war in ways that made for less than democratic leadership practices. We cannot advance our understanding of struggles against oppression, nor ultimately support such struggles, by ignoring these complexities.

A number of Canadian sociologists (joined increasingly by scholars in other disciplines) are doing first rate research on social movements. However, Canadian students of social movements seem to be less connected with each other than our counterparts in other countries, such as the U.S. and the U.K. This is seen in the infrequency of panels in this area at the CSAA meetings over the years, as well as in the absence of any other network (like the ASA thematic Sections, for example) where social movement researchers in Canada could meet, virtually or otherwise. Better networking would enhance the possibilities for more collaborative research and publishing, and a clearer, more self-consciously Canadian contribution to the study of social movements. What would such a contribution look like, and what would be its merits? For one, it could address a relative scarcity of scholarship that focuses on movements in Canada, and that at the same time engages with major theoretical paradigms. This gap has been addressed in recent works such as the contributions to William Carroll's edited collection, *Organizing Dissent*, as well as in the earlier work of Maurice Pinard and Robert Brym. But given the prominence of movements in Canadian political life, we need more

contemporary research in this vein. In relation to scholars elsewhere, Canadians may offer a unique understanding of geographic and cultural challenges to coalition building, such as regional and language differences, that could expand and improve existing theories of movements. Canadian sociologists may also be distinctive in their regard for their research on movements as “resources for creating a transformative politics,” as Carroll puts it. Whatever shape it takes, I hope to witness and be part of an emergent Canadian approach to social movement studies.

<http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/cjscopy/reviews/Kowalchuk.html>

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