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Sidney Tarrow Breaches Boundaries

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In his *Movements and Parties*, Sidney Tarrow brings to bear a lifetime of studying contentious politics outside the U.S. to a century and a half of American public politics, from the Civil War to the turbulent presidency of Donald J. Trump. The result is a masterful distillation of how U.S. democracy has expanded and contracted, powered by the interaction between the two titular modes of political action: social movements and political parties. “It is from the continuing link between movements and the parties they produce that both the energy and the conflicts within these parties are drawn,” Tarrow writes (pp. 15-16). The book is a kaleidoscopic elaboration of this central thesis.

Outside the United States, the idea that political parties and grassroots movements ceaselessly interact and interpenetrate is unexceptionable; Tarrow at several points references the “movement-party” hybrid well-known from Latin American and European politics. But until recently, within U.S. political science departments, movements and parties belonged to two different conceptual universes. In my first year at university in the U.S., I was astonished to learn that political parties’ principal function was to “aggregate” interests, while interest groups’ function was to lobby Congress. As for social movements and other “anti-systemic” aberrations, they were to be studied in sociology courses, not political science.

One of the explicit goals and most significant features of *Movements and Parties* is its gentle yet insistent deflation of American exceptionalism. U.S. democracy is not exceptionally immune to crises nor to the movement/party hybrids that are the stuff of politics in many countries. This is the first boundary productively breached by Tarrow: the disciplinary convention to cloister American politics as sui generis and analyze it with vocabulary, methods, and theories all its own. Among the book’s most edifying discussions is Chapter 9, “Learning about America from Abroad,” which dissects movement/party relations in three historical examples of democratization: the intense polarization of Italy’s fledgling democracy after World War I, before Mussolini’s seizure of power; South Korea’s democratic transition in 1987 and its legacies; and Chile’s imperfect pacted democratization in 1990 and its eventual undoing by the 2019 protests and current constitutional convention.

This stimulating three-democracy tour is the penultimate chapter in the book, coming after we’ve been thoroughly immersed in eight chapters tracing the vicissitudes of 150 years of movement/party interactions in U.S. politics. The chapter goads us to see American democracy as neither completely set apart from other

democracies in terms of its basic DNA, nor a political system in exceptional and unprecedented peril, as some of the more histrionic reactions to the Trump presidency aver. However, as I will elaborate below, Tarrow understates the significance of this chapter built on the strategy of paired comparison that he employed and refined in earlier work (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Tarrow 2010).

The second boundary breached by Tarrow is the longstanding distinction between institutional and noninstitutional politics. The idea that these are two separate realms rests on the initially plausible intuition that political action looks quite different in each. Voting, lobbying, and parliamentary wrangling have different attributes than protesting, launching campaigns, or engaging in insurrection. The problem, however, lies in reifying the distinction, taking it as a real division in public politics rather than an analytical abstraction, and then studying one form of political action in total isolation from the other. Yet, it's the interaction between the two modes of doing politics that characterizes real political dynamics. As Tarrow's frequent collaborator Doug McAdam notes, noninstitutional politics "always occur in an institutionalized political context and typically are set in motion by more routine, political processes. In turn, these episodes have the potential to reshape the formal systems of politics in which they are embedded." (McAdam 2001: 230).

Tarrow pursues this reciprocal influence across his 150-year survey of U.S. politics. Take his analysis of the African-American civil rights movement to illustrate the first part of McAdam's contention. Tarrow reconceptualizes the struggle for African-American civil rights as a "long movement" that began not in the 1950s, with the boycotts, sit-ins, and mass marches that most observers emphasize, but in the years 1916-1917, when African-Americans campaigned against lynching in the South and assaults on African-American neighborhoods in the North. The movement's eventual alliance with the Democratic Party, operative to this day, "took the movement along a long and circuitous route, involving the courts, the executive, and a large and sometimes violent countermovement before political leaders grudgingly took up the cause of civil rights," (p. 102). That is, the civil rights movement engaged in "institutional" politics such as rights litigation in courts and voter registration drives even as it multiplied its "extra-institutional" repertoire of mass marches, sit-ins, and other forms of direct action.

Flipping the causal arrow, movements reshape the formal systems of politics. For me, the most remarkable example is the story of the 1972 reforms that democratized the two parties' presidential nomination process. Nurtured by the anti-Vietnam War and civil rights movements of the 1960s, New Left members of the Democratic Party created the current system of binding popular primaries (McAdam and Kloos 2014: 27-29). The revolutionary reforms shifted selection of the party's presidential nominee from party gatekeepers to grassroots members. Astonishingly, the Republican Party adopted the same changes, even though it did not face internal pressures for reform. By shifting the selection of presidential candidates from the summits to the grassroots, the 1972 reforms placed the parties' most consequential decision in the hands of motivated movement/party activists.

The long-term consequence was to open the door to outsiders to secure the nomination and potentially the presidency (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018: 53-54). This had simultaneously democratizing and de-democratizing effects. The reforms' democratizing face shifted power from elite powerbrokers to rank and file members; their de-democratizing face made it easier for demagogues to secure election by perfectly legal means. When Donald Trump won the 2016 election, he was the first U.S. president without prior experience in public office. Tarrow's point is that the "movementization" of America's parties transformed not only their internal structures but the broader institutional landscape of U.S. politics. Since competition between parties is the primary mode of filling public offices at the municipal, state, and federal levels, changes within and between the two parties directly translate into transformations in the sprawling American state.

One of the book's most intriguing yet underdeveloped insights is that the parties' movementization took different forms. The Democratic Party's openness to social movements manifests as a multivocal coalition of labor, civil rights, environmental, gay rights, and women's movements, while Republican Party

movementization resembled a right wing “Leninist infiltration” (137) that ejected moderates and remade the party into a coherent ideological instrument (146). The insight here is that America’s two parties are not broadly similar institutions representing the center-right and center-left, but have become two different creatures. One is a heterogeneous alliance composed of distinct elements (white progressives, progressive people of color, younger voters), the other is a more coherent body driven by a cross-class swath of white Americans motivated by fears of social displacement. But what accounts for this contrast, and will it be sharpened or diluted in the face of America’s looming demographic shift to a nonwhite majority?

Tarrow hints at differences in the tactics of leftwing versus rightwing movements, especially the left’s historical suspicion of party politics, as an explanation for why the Democratic Party has not been seized by a single faction (145). But I wish he had lingered more on why movementization looks so different in the two parties. After all, rightwing movements are also heterogeneous and far from monolithic. How were they able to adopt extreme left tactics of infiltration to capture the Republican Party, making it “an ideologically fused and politically brittle party” (229)? Is this simply an echo of the sociological axiom that organized minorities are more powerful than diffuse, diverse majorities? Or is it less an American development than the American variant of the global ascent of the political Right? Or is it both, neither, or some other explanation?

That the United States is not insulated from global political trends is the major theme of the aforementioned Chapter 9, “Learning About America From Abroad.” In three revealing political histories, Tarrow shows how his master mechanism of movement-party relations produced very different outcomes for democratization. Italy’s politics after World War I were characterized by an especially virulent form of polarization, not only between party elites but also the competing political subcultures in civil society that they represented (anarchists, socialists, communists, Catholics, nationalists). The warring party/movement factions were unable to coalesce and fend off Mussolini’s destruction of the fledgling democracy. By contrast, South Korea shows what can happen with a different configuration of party/movement linkages. A coalition of movements and parties forced the end of authoritarian rule in 1987, bringing to bear the power of both direct action (strikes and mass demonstrations) and centralized coordination via the New Korean Democratic Party (NKDP). Remarkably, this coalitional structure endured after the transition and became institutionalized, enabling “South Korea [to] continue to prosper as a contentious democratic system,” (219).

From interwar Europe to late twentieth century Southeast Asia, Tarrow travels to contemporary Chile, where a highly innovative constituent process is underway, sparked by protests in 2019 that were the largest since the end of the Pinochet dictatorship in 1990. Tarrow traces the protests to the exclusionary nature of Chile’s democratization, granting military and business leaders veto power over policies while sidelining or coopting the social movements that had played a central role in edging out autocracy. This pacted democratization left intact the neoliberal reordering of Chile’s economy fashioned by the Pinochet regime, aggravating the intense social inequalities that powered the 2019 protests. If Italy and South Korea demonstrate different patterns of close interaction between parties and movements, Chile shows that a gulf between parties and social movements can both jumpstart democratic transition and impede democratic equality.

From these three contrasting cases, Tarrow extracts lessons about polarization and inequality (Italy and Chile) and the abiding importance of putting democratic survival ahead of partisan advantage (South Korea). His remarks are addressed to an American readership likely unused to thinking of their political system as comparable in any meaningful sense to younger democracies, least of all interwar Italy or far-flung South Korea! Tarrow is goading his American readers to think anew about their country’s democratization, not in terms of gauzy ideals, exceptionalist myths, or sensationalist prognoses about democracy’s death, but how it has changed shape, for good and ill, over a 150-year span. To demonstrate that shape-shifting, he has analytically selected one vital political relationship, the “critical connection” in his subtitle between movements and parties, and demonstrated how it powered democratization *and* de-democratization in American history *and* the histories of other countries.

Notice the and/both logic rather than either/or. This is perplexing for both scholars and interested general readers. The latter are not accustomed to placing U.S. democracy side-by-side with other polities to see what patterns or contrasts might emerge, attaining deeper levels of understanding than are possible by studying single countries. For their part, many social scientists are trained to think in dichotomous terms, so that the effect of movement/parties on democratization is conceived as either positive or negative. To show as Tarrow does that it has both positive and negative effects, often simultaneously, is disorienting. The initial reaction may be to demand a more precise enumeration of conditions under which movement/parties strengthen democracy, and conditions that undermine it. Useful as that may be, I do not think Tarrow wants us to stop there in our thinking, with a neat two columns of contrasting conditions.

The chapter and the book as a whole exemplify a different tradition and method in social research, what Tarrow and his co-authors termed “relational realism” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001: 23). Its core ontological premise is that “relationships are the basic social units,” as Charles Tilly argued many years ago in a spirited methodological manifesto (Tilly 1984: 28). Because relationships change and vary across time and space, it is not possible to develop law-like generalizations along the lines of “tight movement/party connections promote democratization,” as disconfirming evidence from Italy in 1919-1922 and the Republican party from 2010 to the present demonstrates. Instead, Tarrow and his collaborators described their explanatory ethos as closer to molecular biology, identifying “mechanisms that reappear in a wide variety of settings but in different sequences and combinations, hence with different collective outcomes” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001: 23).

The mechanism-based approach in social research encourages a much closer engagement with how things happen than the older and more influential structural tradition. That tradition takes an outcome of interest (e.g. a revolution, civil war, democratic breakthrough, etc.), then reaches back for antecedent conditions that might explain its occurrence. Instead, relational realism starts with a relation between at least two actors as the basic building block of both social life and social analysis, then traces how the relation changes over time. It goes against social scientists’ injunction to reduce social complexity to get their analyses going. Tarrow humorously alludes to this with his quip about political scientists’ “habitual practice of slicing the study of politics into neat and manageable sectors,” (12), thereby ignoring the vital linkages, or relationships, that constitute the socio-political world. The result is a stylized depiction of political phenomena that places them in tidy functionalist boxes (parties are office-seekers, social movements are identity-promoters, interest groups are policy-demanders) that do not capture their interactive dynamics and interpenetration.

To me the real strength of relational analyses is how they reveal nearly the full range of actors that bring about outcomes in democratic, nondemocratic, and hybrid regimes. In almost every historical episode Tarrow analyzes, he focuses not only on the dyad of movements and parties, but also counter-movements, the media, and the state. If we disaggregate as we must the latter into its constituent executive, legislative, and judicial institutions, then the minimum set of interacting actors that Tarrow’s relational analysis reveals is seven! One can imagine even more fine-grained accounts that distinguish between different agencies within the executive or distinct levels of the judiciary. Social scientists who uphold parsimony as the standard for superior explanations may balk at this riot of entities. However, rather than an unwieldy narrative mired in details, in the right hands this embrace of complexity offers unparalleled insight into how polities actually operate and change.

Consider again Tarrow’s analysis of the civil rights movement’s alliance with the Democratic Party. He begins by showing how the movement first sought out the media and the courts in their struggle to put an end to lynching, partly due to the parties’ indifference to the abuses endured by African Americans. Once Democratic Party leaders and presidents reluctantly embraced African American rights and passed enabling legislation in the 1960s, a well-organized white counter-movement immediately formed to resist integration and began its long march to infiltrate the Republican Party. It developed its own media infrastructure, grassroots associations, and deep-pocketed donors. This rightwing assemblage continued to grow for 30

years and eventually enabled Donald Trump's insurgent candidacy, though he had no hand in its creation. Trump's presidency then generated a broad counter-movement of progressives that engaged in mass demonstrations and partisan activism, eventually seating the most diverse freshman class of any U.S. Congress in the 2018 midterm election.

"Must social scientists choose between generality and complexity, between research that is broad but shallow and research that is narrow but deep? Can they have both in the same study – in the same analytic breath?" Charles Ragin posed this rhetorical question more than two decades ago and urged that we should aspire to an affirmative answer (Ragin 1998: 107). And now Sidney Tarrow's *Movements and Parties* shows how it can be done. He selects a general pattern, party/movement interaction, then reconstructs how it operates across U.S. history and the history of other polities, leaving us to grapple with its divergent effects. What's more, by re-placing within the same analytical frame the constellation of political actors and relationships that have been separated by scholarly conventions, methodological rules, and disciplinary divisions of labor, Tarrow shows that embracing complexity need not entail losing coherence or generalizability. Those of us made uneasy by this seeming tradeoff and the pressure to choose one or the other can only heartily thank him.

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