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Protest and Opportunities: The Political Outcomes of Social Movements

By Felix Kolb

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Why do social movements succeed and when do they fail? This question has concerned many scholars since social movements became a field of study but until now no satisfactory answer has been given. Felix Kolb has embarked on the demanding project to give at least a partial answer to this question. He sets out to develop a 'clear causal theorie[s] of social movements and political change' (p. 11). Building on a thorough review of the existing literature the book starts with a theoretical chapter in which Kolb develops a framework that allows us to identify the central factors that determine the substantive impact of social movements on (state) policies and on institutions.

He identifies five causal mechanism of policy change: The *disruption mechanism* describes a process through which social movements cause a political crisis that requires a reaction to restore public order. This mechanism can only be activated if a movement has the potential to cause large-scale disruption and if an elite conflict guarantees that the disruption cannot be met by pure repression. The *public preference mechanism* relies on a movement's ability to change the public opinion in its favour. Through the *political access mechanism* social movements can try to strengthen their political representation and integration in the polity. The *judicial mechanism* captures the use of litigation. And the *international politics mechanism* describes the scale and forum shifting activities of social movements trying to find international support to exert pressure on national governments. The theoretical framework is convincingly presented, but the real strength lies in the remaining two sections where it is applied to two empirical cases: the US-American civil rights movement and the anti-nuclear movement in 18 OECD countries.

The civil rights movement case builds on the extensive literature on this movement. In contrast to several studies that have outlined how the civil rights movement had used litigation and court action to advance their goals, Kolb argues that 'the judicial mechanism has played a much more limited role in the political outcomes of the civil rights movement than is often assumed' (p. 113). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were much more a reaction to the disruption and the international politics mechanisms, while the public preference mechanism played only a minor role.

In the anti-nuclear movement case Kolb extends the existing literature with his own data and comes to some surprising results: most notably that the openness of the political system did not have a statistically significant impact. Using Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) he can qualify these findings, showing that in fact two patterns were responsible for the success or failure of the anti-nuclear movement across countries. '[S]ignificant nuclear change occurs when sustained mobilisation is mediated, either by a combination of elite support and anti-nuclear public opinion, or by open institutional structures' (p. 228). In contrast to the US civil rights movement the anti-nuclear movement succeeded mainly through the activation of the public preferences mechanism.

The two empirical cases clearly demonstrate the validity and usefulness of Kolb's five mechanisms of political change. What he has accomplished is not just a clever application of the recently popular mechanisms concept, but a genuine contribution towards a better understanding of the possible impact of social movements. His model reaches its limits where movement impact takes less concrete forms than laws or material policy outcomes. If the main impact of the new social movements is a change of deep social structures and norms, if their main outcomes are changes of attitudes, perceptions, and lifestyles, Kolb is offering neither measurement for these outcomes nor the mechanisms that cause them. But within these limitations the model could be expanded to include other forms of collective action. We may think of a lobbying mechanism or an economic pressure mechanism that functions the same way as the five mechanisms identified by Kolb.

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