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11.363: Civil Society and Environment
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NOTE: This summary only includes the three main readings.

March 15th Summary Paper

On the International Origins of Domestic Political Opportunities (McAdam)
McAdam argues that while there has been significant growth in the study of social movements over the past twenty years, most of these scholarly studies have sought to explain the emergence and response of collective action within the context of domestic or national level. McAdam discusses the concept of 'political opportunity'; in reference to how social movements operate, develop, adapt and respond situated within the political framework of the nation-state. McAdam argues that the concept of political opportunity applies to all levels of institutional power – not just at the domestic national level. Historically movement scholars have had 'nation-centric' bias in the way they sought to conceptualize the origin and locus of political opportunity, however, McAdam asserts that, in fact, political opportunity can occur at multi-levels within the state as well at international levels outside of the state's political boundaries. He discusses multiple examples to demonstrate his argument: 1) Because the political environment in the USA during the 1970's was not conducive to the women's, environmental or the anti-nuclear struggle, these movements did not direct themselves at the national level, but rather 're-directed' themselves toward the state and local levels to better leverage their concerns; 2) Movement organizer's are highly tactical in their engagement approach and often organizer's will 'play' one level of government against another as one done during the civil rights movement; and 3) political opportunity often (particularly today) targets the international level – beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. In this case he cites the case of how the Soviet Union, in collaboration with many African and Asian countries, put pressure on the United States over domestic policy regarding race relations.

Alternative Types of Cross-national Diffusion in the Social Movement Arena (Snow and Benford)

Snow and Benford support the McAdam thesis that political opportunity is not only centered at the national level, but they go further in articulating exactly how social movements are forged across political boundaries. The authors identify three central types of diffusion 'models' for how social movements move across national political boundaries. The first model is termed 'reciprocal adoption' and this focuses on the mutual interest of transmitters (external groups and/or social movements) and adopters (internal/domestic groups and/or social movements) in relation to the object of diffusion. This model produces active, reciprocal engagement in the diffusion process. The second model is 'strategic adoption' and refers to situations where adopters strategically and selectively borrow aspects of another culture and adapt it to fit into an adopter's culture. Only adopters are actively engaged in the diffusion process in this model. The third model is 'accommodation' and refers to fitting or adopting the object of diffusion into a targeted socio-cultural context. I was not fully clear how the third model was different from the second. The authors essentially argue that diffusion among social movements is more complex than typically discussed. Snow and Benford demonstrate that very little information/knowledge is likely to move across nations without some form of alteration either by the transmitters or the adopters.

International Triggering Events (Carmin and Hicks)

Carmin and Hicks conducted a study from 1987 to 2001 in Poland the Czech Republic and based on their findings argue that "movement actions are more predictable in stable regimes because governments are better able to control the effects of external events". They assert that in the context of authoritarian regimes

external actions “tend to foster development by altering political opportunities”, while in democratic contexts, these regimes tend to actually bring resources directly to the movement. Although Carmin and Hicks acknowledge the thesis articulated by McAdam (see above), the authors argue despite the forces of globalization, the domestic political institutions and processes within a nation-state remains a key factor in how social movements exert influence. One area that struck my attention was how Carmin and Hicks characterized regime type. Given my own research is nested within the Chinese political context I was particularly interested in how the ‘authoritarian’ typology was crafted. Interestingly enough I was unable to fully situate China in either the stable or volatile authoritarian regime, therefore I wonder if there are particular political characteristics of Poland and the Czech Republic (or Eastern and Central Europe in general) that cannot be transplanted to other authoritarian states such as China, Viet Nam or Burma? For example, I would have automatically defined China as a stable authoritarian regime; however, China does not fully insulate their society from external influences. Was this regime typology developed only within the context of Western and Eastern European socio-political contexts or was it intended to be globally applicable? To be discussed.