INSTITUTIONALIZING SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: THE SPREAD OF U.S. RECYCLING ADVOCACY GROUPS

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In this paper, I study how social movements become institutionalized through an examination of the diffusion of U.S. recycling advocacy groups. While the literature on social movements has interpreted social movement institutionalization negatively as entailing conservative goal transformation, little attention has been paid to the actual processes by which social movements sustain themselves through the creation of social movement organizations. Drawing on the institutional approach to organizational analysis, I show how the spread of social movement organizations depends on the ability of SMO pioneers to reshape field-level cultural beliefs in a way that enables subsequent organizations to be created in environments that were formerly inhospitable. Specifically, I show that the formation of early state-level recycling advocacy groups was enabled by state-level conditions that were favorable to ecological activism. These pioneering organizations played a key role in establishing a recycling social movement infrastructure and reshaping beliefs about the efficacy of recycling in the solid waste management field. As a result, the widespread diffusion of recycling advocacy groups was enabled, but mainly in states with high urban density and greater levels of state incinerator capacity. I conclude with a discussion of the fruitfulness of a broader dialogue among organizational theorists and social movements scholars.