ABSTRACT

Where Do We Stand? Parallel Developments in Organizations and Social Movements Research

John Campbell Department of Sociology Dartmouth College

To what extent has research in organizations and social movements developed similar concepts, theories, and analytic strategies? This chapter shows that in important respects these two literatures have already developed striking similarities. Many of the similarities have to do with how organizations and social movement theorists study social change. First, much organizational theory is concerned with explaining how organizational practices evolve in path-dependent ways. Similarly, social movement scholars discuss how the already existing repertoires and tool kits inherited from the past contribute to the evolution of movement structures and strategies. Second, the social movements literature stresses the importance of issue framing as critical to movement success. Recently, organizational analysis does too. Third, organizational theorists have sought to explain how different practices diffuse within organizational populations. Work by social movement scholars has adopted a diffusion approach to map, for example, how social movements develop and disseminate programs and strategies through networks of activists. Fourth, organization theory suggests that the regulatory, normative and cognitive dimensions of institutions affect how organizations develop. Thus, organizations are embedded in institutions. Research has also demonstrated that cognitive structures limit the range of practices that social movement activists can imagine; normative structures limit what is considered appropriate movement practice; and regulatory structures limit the range of practices that movements pursue. Fifth, the social movements literature has been concerned with how states spark, repress, and channel movement activity in one direction or another. Organizational theorists have made similar arguments about organizational change. For instance, different types of political arrangements (liberal, statist, corporatist) affect how business is organized just as they affect how social movements are organized. Finally, much organizational theory is devoted to identifying the conditions under which different organizational forms emerge, such as decentralized networks or centralized hierarchies. The same is true for social movements theory, which specifies the conditions under which social movements become centralized or decentralized. The point is that these two literatures have already developed serendipitously along parallel tracks that, if fully appreciated, could provide the basis for mutually beneficial cross-fertilization.