Social change, social theory, and the convergence of movements and organizations
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There has been increasing recognition by some scholars of organizations and of social movements that these two areas of research would benefit from greater crossover. Social movements are often represented by formal organizations, organizations increasingly resemble episodic “movements” rather than ongoing bounded actors, and organizations and movements are changing their strategies and routines in response to similar social and technological changes. Moreover, the most visible social movement of our time, aimed at reining in “globalization from above,” is explicitly oriented toward contemporary economic and organizational arrangements. It is an apt time for scholars in these two areas to forge stronger ties and to build on the intersection of the two.

There are some signs of inchoate convergence in the agendas of organization studies and the study of social movements. Two decades ago Zald and Berger (1978) noted the analogy between political change processes in organizations and social movements in society. More recently a handful of researchers from both schools have begun to draw on work from the other, using social movement theory to make sense of shareholder activism (Davis and Thompson, 1994) and the organization of the biotechnology industry (Koput, Powell, and Smith-Doerr, 1997), or using ecological concepts of organizations to explain the growth of feminist social movement organizations (Minkoff, 1997) or concepts from neo-institutionalism to explain the spread of organizational repertoires among women’s political organizations (Clemens, 1993). In each case the concepts, mechanisms, and hypotheses from one theoretical tradition illuminated processes studied in the other.

The impetus for greater crossover comes from events in the world as well as from academic concerns. As corporations have become increasingly multinational and encompassing, they have taken on the character of polities whose “citizens” may engage in collective action to challenge policies they disagree with (Zald and Berger, 1978). For instance, Creed and Scully (1998) looked at social movements within and across organizations in their study of the spread of the policy of providing domestic partner benefits for gay and lesbian employees. Within organizations, activists had the difficult task of locating and organizing the support of employees that may have preferred anonymity. Across organizations, activists formed networks with activists in other organizations to share tactics and provide support, thus providing a mechanism for the diffusion of policies through interorganizational networks “from below.” Analogous processes characterize the spread of movement tactics across nations, where networks of labor, consumer, and human rights advocates seek to shape the agendas of corporations and states as the rules of the new global economy are worked out (Evans, 2000). And within nations, protest movements have arisen to respond to IMF-induced policies in South Korea, US-backed privatization in Puerto Rico, cross-border hostile takeovers in Germany, and the process of globalization itself in Seattle. In a globalizing economy, organizations are both the context and the object of social movements.

This essay serves to introduce the larger conference volume by asking the questions “Why convergence? Why now?”