Normalizing the Unpredictable:
Social Movement Society, Constructivism, and Social Psychology

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Abstract

In face of great changes in social movements, the Social Movement Society (SMS) theory was first coined in 1998, by Meyer and Tarrow, so as to understand how social movements became increasingly part of the social and political bargain. The most basic assumption of Social Movement Society – the normalization of a social phenomenon which used to be unpredictable – illustrate how reality is not a given fact or immutable object. In fact, it is subjective and mostly constructed by individuals' view of it. This transition to Social Movement Society, increasingly globally, leads one to question: how changes of social movement in the new century has been altering norms? In order to answer this question, this essay advances the hypothesis that Social Movement Society's argument proves how social and political norms are changeable. Thus, we argue that social psychology and constructivism norm studies together reinforce Meyer and Tarrow's argument.

Keywords: Social Movement Society, Constructivism, Social Psychology

Introduction

In face of great changes in social movements, many authors approached the idea of a society at which protests and social mobilization became normalized. Yet, Meyer and Tarrow were the most successful in developing a concept whose argument encompasses the major transformations of protests. The Social Movement Society (SMS) theory was first coined in 1998, in an attempt to understand and explain how social movements became increasingly part of the social and political bargain. Meyer and Tarrow's idea relies on three main hypotheses: "(1) over time expansion of protest; (2) over time diffusion of protest; [and] (3) over time institutionalization of protest" (Soule and Earl, 2005: 345). Later, researches developed upon SMS theory settled a fourth dimension: "(4) over time institutionalization of state responses to protest" (idem, ibidem).

The most basic assumption of Social Movement Society – the normalization of a social phenomenon which used to be unpredictable – illustrate how reality is not a given fact or immutable object. In fact, it is subjective and mostly constructed by individuals' view of it. Through various process and influenced by many factors – identities, emotions, beliefs, ideas –, the social movement became normalized and institutionalized both by governments and citizens. Thus, norms regarding protests have changed. This transition to Social Movement Society, increasingly globally, leads one to question: how changes of social movement in the new century has been altering norms? In order to answer this question, this essay will propose the hypothesis that Social Movement Society's argument proves how social and political norms are changeable. Thus, we will argue that social psychology and constructivism norm studies together reinforce Meyer and Tarrow's argument. The essay will be

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divided into three sections. First, we will look specifically at Social Movement Society, mapping and discussing its main arguments. Secondly, we will explore SMS through the lens of constructivism norm studies. Thirdly, we will use the social psychology inputs to further analyze SMS idea.

Social Movement Society Theory

In 1998, Meyer and Tarrow coined the term "Social Movement Society". The idea was not totally unprecedented. Etzioni, in 1970, used the concept of "demonstration democracy" and Pross, in 1992, developed the "protests society" hypothesis (Ramos and Rodger, 2015: 11). Also, Ruch and Neidhardt claimed to have approached the idea previously (Ruch and Neidhardt, 2002: 7). Still, Meyer and Tarrow popularized the idea, which they used to understand how social movement changed since the 1960's. The theory was an attempt to address the fact that advanced industrial democracies were experiencing an increase in protests. For different purposes and done by diverse actors, those protests were increasingly part of social and political life, becoming progressively institutionalized. Miley and Tarrow noted that the protests had become more organized and less disruptive: they had changed from outside-of-the-state to somewhat integrated into the state (Meyer and Tarrow, 1998). Social Movement Society (SMS) is one "in which protest is a routine part of political bargaining" (Jenkins, Wallace and Fullerton, 2008: 12). In sum, the SMS theory relies on tree fundamental hypothesis:

> First, social protest has moved from being a sporadic, if recurring feature of democratic politics, to become a perpetual element in modern life. Second, protest behavior is employed with greater frequency, by more diverse constituencies, and is used to represent a wider range of claims than ever before. Third, professionalization and institutionalization may be changing the major vehicle of contentious claims — the social movement — into an instrument within the realm of conventional politics. (Meyer and Tarrow, 1998: 4)

There was an increase of more institutionalized forms of contention. Similarly, contentious diffused to a larger sector of the population: there was (1) a social and demographic diffusion, and (2) a spatial diffusion (ibid: 9). Gender was the most outstanding shift: women started to play a progressively dominant role in protest. Additionally, political right-wing orientation activists emerged. Mobilizations spread "across age groups, from men to women, from left to right, and from workers and students to other social groupings" (ibid: 11). Also, tactics and symbols of social protests spread geographically, and turn out to be more easily and more quickly transnational (ibid, ibidem). Likewise, with the advent of the Internet, protests became more often diffused online and through the telephone. Thus, the forms of protests' organization were redefined and its transnational dissemination became more rapid (ibid: 12).

Two of the major trends of contemporary societies' changes have mostly facilitated the social movement's diffusion: professionalization and institutionalization. Differently from the 1960s, social movements in the new century realized that "skills and resources for mounting the efforts that comprise social movement could be concentrated, reproduced and professionalized" (ibid: 15). The democratic ethos of social movements has become a paradox: if earlier the protests had to be essentially a grassroots phenomenon, now it demonstrates how institutionalization can be more effective. Movement organization can achieve democratic reforms "by abandoning certain democratic and amateurish politics practices" (ibid, ibidem). The institutionalization was an advantage for both social organizations and states: for one side, activists gained more

space to negotiate and have their claims heard; for the other side, the states could have more control over mobilization, which was no longer unpredictable.

Since 1998, Meyer and Tarrow's theory has been greatly studied, and was complemented with a fourth dimension: "the institutionalization of state responses to social movements and protests in particular" (Soule and Earl, 2005: 346). Likewise, some authors empirically tested the SMS. Jenkins, Wallace and Fullerton, for example, used a "multilevel analysis of 41,235 respondents nested within thirty-five countries from the 1990 World Values Survey" (Jenkins, Wallace and Fullerton, 2008: 12) so as to identify whether "postindustrialism and affluence combined with the growth of the state and neocorporatist bargaining is creating greater protest potential" (ibid, ibidem). Soule and Earl identified how poorly the SMS has empirically tested. In order to fill this gap and contribute to the debate, the authors conducted a research on "newly available data on over 19,000 protest events occurring in the U.S. between 1960 and 1986" (Soule and Earl, 2005: 345). They concluded that SMS indeed explains great fundamental aspects of social movements' changes in the new century: the percentage of events with movement organization's presence has increased, as well as the number of different protest claims, also, protest's size has grown, and violent forms of protest have declined (ibid: 361). However, the results showed some gaps in SMS theory: there was a decrease in the number of protests, scarcer new groups started protests, and there were not many new claims (ibid: 345). Soule and Earl, though, reaffirmed the importance and feasibility of the SMS theory, contributing to its refinement.

The researches that relied upon Social Movement Society rationing proved its argument and empirically demonstrated how protests have become more organized, professionalized and institutionalized: "protest activities have developed a "taken-for-granted" nature and have become part of the conventional repertoire of activities that citizens in such contexts use to express opinions about their polities" (ibid: 346). Social movements went from unexpected to regular, from exception to normalized. Thus, as argued by constructivist studies, norms became norms exactly when an "intersubjective understanding of the society became taken for granted" (Johnston, 2001: 494 *in* Hoffman, 2010: 4).

Constructivism Norms and Social Movement Society

At the end of the 1980s and begging of the 1990s, the mainstream theories – namely Liberalism and, mostly, Realism – had their main assumptions questioned, since they did not foresee the end of the Cold War (Reus-Smit, 2005; Nugroho, 2008). Thus, Constructivism – among other critical theories – gained space by proposing alternative ways to understand the world: a multidisciplinary theory based on a variety of sociological and philosophical approaches (Gonçalves, Silva, 2010), which aims to be the

middle ground between the rationalists[1] and relativistic interpretivists[2] theories (Adler, 1997, 1999). The theory's main assumptions are that

> important aspects of politics are socially constructed, a commitment to mutual constitution as an answer to the agent-structure problem, a dedication to the importance of intersubjective reality in contrast to objective/subjective realities, and a focus on ideational and identity factors in analyses of world politics (Hoffman, 2010: 2).

To constructivist theory "social reality and the knowledge of it are the product of a permanent construction" (Sousa, 2005: 179). This assumption comes from the assumption of the social significance of ideas, which, in turn, determines interests, norms, and behaviors (Adler, 1999). The basic premise of Constructivism is that we live in a world built through social construction. There is no *ontological antecedence* for agent/structure relationship: structure and agent construct each other (Wendt, 1992; Gonçalves, Silva, 2010, Funag, 2012), as social relations change and cultural identities are shaped during history.

Constructivism has three central ontological propositions: *first*, "*normative* or *ideational* structures are just as important as material structures" (Reus-Smit, 2005: 196); *second,* "understanding how non-material structures condition actors' identities are important because identities inform interests and, in turn, actions" (ibid: 197); and, *third,* "agents and structures are *mutually constituted*" (idem, ibidem). In other words, Constructivism focuses on how agents and structure co-construct each other, through the social process of meaning and conceptualization of reality. Then, an important study within Constructivism is the norm-oriented and identity approach (Hoffman, 2010: 3). The concept of "social norm", understood as the ideas that one may have about "appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity" (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 891), turn out to be central to comprehend the process of social construction. The earlier constructivist studies on "social norm" had three main veins: *normative behavior[3]*, *socialization[4]* and *normative emergence[5]*. Between those, normative emergence is the one that better help us to understand the process of institutionalization of social movements, since it focuses on "how ideas come to achieve normative status" (Hoffman, 2010: 4).

The 'norm life cycle' (Finnemore and Sikkink,1998) is an important analytical tool to understand the process in which norms emerge: norm is defined as "a standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity" (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998: 891) and its emergence is cyclical schematized. In stage 1, *norm emergence*, norm entrepreneurs try to convince their governments, by persuasion, to adopt the norm (ibid: 898). After enough states have approved the norm, it is possible to happen the stage 2, *norm cascade*: states begin to be motivated to adopt the norm, aiming to achieve

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[1] Realism, Neo-Realism and Neo-Liberalism Institutionalist (Adler, 1999: 201).
[2] Postmodernism and Poststructuralism, Critical Theory (Adler, 1999: 201).
[3] "How an extant norm influences behavior within a community" (Hoffman, 2010: 3).
[4] "How an extant norm or a nascent norm from one community diffuses and is internalized by actors outside that community" (idem, ibidem).
[5] "How an idea reaches intersubjective status in a community" (idem, ibidem).

legitimacy, reputation, and esteem (ibid, ibidem). When enough countries accept the norm, the very definition of "state" converges to encompass it (idem, ibidem). Finally, in stage 3, *internalization*, the norm is extensively assimilated by domestic and international laws, and lasting non-conforming states end up to implement the norm (idem, ibidem). In this stage, "norms may become so widely accepted that they are internalized by actors and achieve a "taken-for-granted" quality that makes conformance with the norm almost automatic" (ibid: 904).

Appling the "norm life cycle" in SMS, one can recognize the stages at which social movement became normalized: at stage one, there are groups of activists, motivated by altruism, empathy or ideational commitment, which engage in movements in order to pressure their government. The state used to respond badly, with repression and violence, considering the protest to be an undemocratic intrusion into politics (Oliver, et al., 2003: 213). However, those social movements persuaded their government to accept not only their claims but, mostly, their very existence. Then, states brought social movement into their scope, realizing that by doing so they could better control protests. At stage two, with enough states already adopting the institutionalization of social movements, it became important to them not to be seen as repressive and anti-democratic. Thus, many countries (especially liberal ones) became worried about their reputation and encompass internal laws which embrace social movements as part of political and social life. At stage three, social movements already achieve "taken-for-granted" status (Soule and Earl, 2005: 346) and the national and international law already address it (even if indirectly).

Rajagopal (2003) approached partially this process, claiming that international law literature cannot dismiss the "importance of non-state and individual action in international affairs" (Rajagopal, 2003: 397), thus need to "rethink international law through social movements" (idem, ibidem). Likewise, Boutcher and Chua (2018) mapped the links between law and social movement scholarship, and concluded that "law and social movements can now be considered a legitimate scholarly field of its own" (Boutcher and Chua, 2018: 5). This integration of fields demonstrates how social movements became increasingly part of state's institutions, as well as part of political life. Nevertheless, protests are intrinsically related to individuals and identities. Although constructivism had massively approach those dimensions, it focuses mainly on macrostructural scope. Social psychology, in turn, "provides microfoundations for the motives behind normative behavior and identity change" (Shannon, 2012: 14).

Social Psychology Contribution

Social Psychology and Constructivism share assumptions about how the reality is socially constructed, interpreting "world politics through the lenses of identity and beliefs" (Shannon, 2012: 1). Both theories have a common concern in human subjectivity and identity politics (ibid, ibidem). Thus, they could complement each other: Constructivism emphasizes macrofoudantions while Social Psychology focuses on microstructures. As

Shannon (2012: 3) argued: "psychology and constructivism tend to share the ideational axis while often diverging in terms of the relative focus on individual versus environment". Consequently, together both theories have an amazing contribution to International Relations (IR) Theory. Social Psychology focuses on individuals and on which ways they relate "themselves to their own nation and other nations, to the international system as a whole, to foreign policy issues, and to the broader questions of war and peace; and the actual interactions between individuals of different nationalities" (Kelman, 1965: 566). According to Social Psychology's rationing, "reality is perceived by the individual, and a person's unique experiences lead to the formation and accumulation of beliefs that serve in the further perception, interpretation, and evaluation in incoming information" (Shannon, 2012: 8). In other words, it is important to account how individuals perceive, understand, explain and signify their political environment (idem, ibidem).

In this sense, Social Psychology adds an important dimension to the norm change process: the emotions. Kowert (2012) approached it with the Ideational Triangle of identity, choice, and obligation in IR. Norms are directly linked with those three dimensions. Nevertheless, the most mainstream literature of IR does not properly address the obligation dimension. Constructivism has been the greatest theory to approach it, building a strong argument that "national policies are subject after all to perceive normative constraints" (ibid: 50). However, this argument is mostly built upon the assumption that obligation is exclusively a set of shared understandings linked to identities (ibid, ibidem). More than just understand how individuals ought to behave, it is necessary to comprehend how individuals behave in a certain fashion. Thus, the author urges for the contribution of emotional psychology, in order to encompass the assumption that "normativity cannot take form without the semiotic structures that give obligations meaning [but] at the same time, obligations must be meaningful for someone" (ibid: 50-51). This is to say, emotions do have an important role in norms.

The process through which people build their identities and beliefs is not only about cognition and learning, but also has the influence of emotions (Shannon, 2012: 10). And emotions are to a large extent socially and culturally constructed (Rohlinger, Snow, 2006: 518). In Social Movements studies, emotions are an important dimension, since they are the basis for commitment (ibid, ibidem). Commitment, in turn, is the "willingness of social actors to give their energy and loyalty to social systems, the attachment of personality systems to social relations which are seen as self-expressive" (Kanter, 1968: 499). Individuals engage with social movements not only based on the cognitive process or calculation of benefits and costs. The motivation to participate in a social movement is also linked to social networks (Tilly, 2005). The people who engage with social movements are not always those who most identify themselves with protest's initial claims; but those who have the closest personal ties to individuals that were previously involved.

Emotion, grievance, symbolization, and identity – the four keystone concepts to understand "the determinants, character, and consequences of participation in crowds and social movements" (Rohlinger, Snow, 2006: 521) – are a social construction. Those four concepts not only interferer on people's motivation to mobilize, but also in which ways they protest. Social Movement Society demonstrated that in the last thirty years, people engaged more with social movements. Nevertheless, the growth was only of the most institutionalized formats (Soule and Earl, 2005: 361). The willingness to participate in more institutionalized protests can be explained by social networks – which are closely linked with emotions and identities. Social Movement Society also found that protests increased across different social groups. Gender, racial, ethnic, and sexuality were important social groups which developed collective identities and, consequently, widened the collective action. Social movements directly linked with identities increased: this demonstrates how people also engage with protests through emotions that are related to identities. Thus, Social Psychology highlights

> the complex and varied relationships and processes that undergird the articulation of grievances and motivate and sustain participation in crowd and social movement activities. Moreover, because social psychological perspectives tend to examine the interactions among individuals and the contexts in which they are embedded, they help contribute to a more thoroughgoing understanding of participation-related issues in relation to crowds and social movements (Rohlinger, Snow, 2006: 522-523).

Along with Constructivism, Social Psychology has a great contribution to Social Movement studies, since it explains individual dimension and other aspects of motivation and willingness. Specifically about the Social Movement Society, both theories offered a more complete analytical and theoretical framework, which explain how norms can change regarding social movements. There are important dimensions underlying the social movements' changes: emotions, grievance, auto-esteem, reputation, identities. Social Psychology and Constructivism offer the better tools to encompass all these aspects.

Conclusion

Social movements are becoming increasingly institutionalized in our contemporary society. Demonstrations have diffused across social groups and geographic locations. People from the whole world are getting connected, due to better education and increased access to communication and transportation technologies (Meyer and Tarrow, 1998). Protests have become a normal part of social and political life. This transition from unpredictable to recurrent tell us a lot about norm change. Both Constructivism and Social Psychology offers important analytical concepts to understand and analyze such movement. Nevertheless, little has been done in this sense. Constructivism and Social Psychology scholars have worked independently despite having very similar worldviews. Particularly on Social Movements, they have little or no joint research. Thus, the literature losses a great contribution. This essay showed how together Constructivism and Social

Psychology has an important analytical framework to explain how social movements have become increasingly institutionalized.; and urge future researchers to further fill this gap.

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