

# Protest Politics Today

DEVASHREE GUPTA

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## CHAPTER 3

# The Organization

### Objectives

- To examine the range of different entities that make up social movements and recognize the advantages and limitations of these various organizational forms for mounting and sustaining protest.
- To understand key debates about whether social movements benefit from or are harmed by increasing professionalization and formalization.
- To recognize how movement actors can cooperate as well as compete with other like-minded social movement groups.
- To determine the life cycle of movements, from emergence and expansion to decline and dormancy.

### Introduction

At first glance, Chile might seem like an odd place for mass protest to break out in early 2011. It was a spring of uprisings all around the world, as one Arab country after another was swept up in headline-grabbing pro-democracy movements that sought to topple autocratic dictators from their entrenched positions in power. It was the spring of tumultuous, occasionally violent anti-austerity protests in Europe, as Greeks and Spaniards took to the streets to vent their anger at government policies that offered little relief from soaring unemployment, deep cuts to social safety nets, and widespread foreclosures that left people homeless and saddled with debt. It was the year when thousands of Israelis erected large tent camps in the middle of major cities to protest skyrocketing housing costs, and hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets of Israel throughout the summer to call attention to the high cost of living and growing inequality in the country. But these were countries grappling with severe economic pressures. Unemployment in Spain was 21 percent, more than double the average in the European Union, while youth unemployment (for those between 15 and 24

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years) was approaching nearly 50 percent. The economic forecast in the Arab Spring countries also fueled unrest, as educated young people confronted stagnant economic opportunities and governments that were unresponsive to the demands of their people. In Israel, housing prices had risen 40 percent over the previous six years, while food costs were rising faster than incomes.

Chile, however, was not facing these same sorts of economic pressures or autocratic governments. It was a stable established democracy with competitive, multiparty elections. In 2011, its economic forecast was healthy and expanding (Cummings 2015). Unemployment rates had fallen for three years in a row, and in 2011, settled around 7%, while youth unemployment had also fallen, from 22.7% in 2009 to 17.6% in 2011. The overall economy was growing, as GDP per capita rose from roughly \$10,000 in 2009 to \$14,500 by 2011. And that same year, according to the UN Development Index – which measures life expectancy, access to education, and other indicators of well-being – Chile was rated the highest-performing country in Latin America and the Caribbean, and among the top 25% in the world. With falling levels of income inequality and modest inflation rates, Chile lacked the dramatic economic and political catastrophes that seemed to trigger the cascade of protests elsewhere in the world.

And yet thousands of students from Chile's universities took to the streets in 2011 in a sustained protest against the government's education policies, which were characterized by a relatively laissez-faire and market-oriented approach consistent with neoliberal economic values (Bellei and Cabalin 2013). These same policies had dramatically expanded the number of people who pursued higher education, rising from 16% of people aged 18–24 in 1990 to nearly 40% by 2010 (Somma 2012). However, the students argued that these very same policies had led to a proliferation of private educational institutions of variable quality that were not adequately regulated by the government. Moreover, these private institutions used discriminatory admissions standards and legal loopholes to enrich their owners. To pay for these private institutions, students and their families had to borrow money from banks at much higher rates than the state-subsidized loans available to students attending traditional universities, but even at traditional universities, tuition rates climbed as institutions sought to cover their own expenses as government support decreased. The net result was an education system that was itself highly segregated by

socio-economic status and that, in turn, perpetuated inequalities in society. To fix these problems, students demanded more government funding for state schools, tighter regulation of private, for-profit institutions, and an end to discriminatory admissions standards that contributed to inequalities of access and cost (Bellei and Cabalin 2013).

This student movement did not come together spontaneously; it was organized by dedicated people in student federations that represented all the students enrolled at each university. These university-specific federations, some of which had experience with political engagement and activism dating back decades (Bonilla 1960), represented both public and private universities and, in turn, came together in a national confederation – the *Confederación de Estudiantes de Chile* (CONFECH) – which took the lead in spearheading the protests and coordinating action among all the different student organizations around the country. CONFECH and its member groups emphasized democratic and participatory norms in their decision-making processes as proposals were discussed and debated by student assemblies around the country, in addition to assemblies held by the individual member federations on their own campuses (Somma 2012: 303).

The protests began in earnest in May 2011 when CONFECH and its members organized a demonstration that drew 15,000–20,000 people to the streets of the capital, Santiago. In the weeks and months that followed, tens of thousands of university students and their allies – high school students, parents, teachers, labor activists, indigenous activists, and even environmental groups – joined in a series of mass public demonstrations around the country, the largest since the pro-democracy movement mobilized against dictator Augusto Pinochet over 30 years earlier. The student protests captured international attention for their use of playful, performative tactics that complemented street demonstrations and marches. People staged a protest flash mob performance of Michael Jackson's "Thriller," held a kiss-in, and organized family-friendly events at local parks, complete with music and other activities that created a festive mood. They also engaged in sit-ins, occupying hundreds of school buildings as well as TV stations and government offices. Some students even went on hunger strike. In addition to these demonstrations, the students' allies also organized parallel protests. Labor unions, for example, called for strikes, including one at El Teniente, the world's largest underground copper mine, and



a 48-hour national strike during which some 600,000 people protested around the country.

The government was not indifferent to these mass demonstrations, nor the fact that, in opinion polls, almost 80 percent of the public sympathized with the students. It offered different proposals that fulfilled some of the protestors' demands, but all were rejected by CONFECH as insufficiently addressing their concerns. Not one, but two, different Education Ministers were replaced as the protests went on. All throughout 2011 and 2012, students returned to the streets to continue putting pressure on the government to make bigger, more fundamental changes to the education system. As the months passed, the protests started losing some of their intensity and size, but CONFECH continued to organize for change. The movement dwindled significantly after Chile held a presidential election at the end of 2013 and the winner, Michelle Bachelet, vowed to make sweeping reforms to the education system. While the movement quieted down in the months following Bachelet's election, it did not die out or go away. In fact, it had something of a resurgence in 2015, organizing protests around the country – with marked increases in violence – in response to what it saw as foot-dragging by a government that had yet to follow through on its promises.

The story of Chile's student movement, particularly the level of fierce conviction and creativity demonstrated by the students themselves, is certainly a compelling one. But the case also illustrates a key insight about social movements: even though we may speak about them in the singular – *the* student movement, *the* environmental movement, *the* pro-democracy movement, and so forth – any one movement is actually a complex entity consisting of multiple groups and actors, each with different identities, interests, goals, and tactical preferences that are bound together in a constantly shifting network of relationships. Movements, in other words, are anything but homogeneous, unitary actors. In Chile, the movement had, for example, multiple formal organizations that were involved in protests, including the individual student federations, the central confederation, as well as trade unions, environmental groups, and others. There were also individuals who participated in protest who did not belong to any particular organization at all, including the parents of students. And there were people who did not protest themselves, but aided and abetted the protestors via supportive acts, like the municipal workers in

Santiago's city hall who let a group of about 50 high school students into the building so they could occupy it. To understand movement dynamics requires a closer look at this diversity of actors to better understand their roles and interactions.

### *Social Movement Organizations*

Collective action, especially sustained protests against well-resourced and powerful targets such as governments or corporations, takes time and effort. It also requires resources – namely, money and people – to be carried off successfully. Without a sufficient number of people, movements struggle to be taken seriously and risk being dismissed as nothing more than nuisances. Had the Chilean student movement mobilized 20 people in that first demonstration, rather than 20,000, we might reasonably assume that the government would not have rushed to propose education reforms in response to student demands, nor would they have so readily agreed to meetings between movement representatives and the country's elected officials. Movements also require monetary resources to pay for the sometimes-mundane but necessary costs of coordinating and sustaining protest, which can include all manner of expenses, from renting meeting space to printing banners, to securing protest permits, to arranging for transportation, to maintaining a website. Resources are precious, and they are usually scarce. Movements that are able to muster resources effectively are more likely to initiate and sustain protest over time.

This line of argument stems directly from resource mobilization theory, whose advocates argue that organizations are of particular importance in social movements because they are best able to aggregate resources (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Moreover, such scholars argue that organizations are also better equipped to use those resources for mobilizing people for collective action. Recall from the discussion in chapter 1 that, in RM theory, the individual grievances that people hold are insufficient to generate organized protest because of the collective action problem. Social movement organizations (SMOs), however, can overcome this obstacle by providing selective incentives, lowering the costs, and increasing the benefits of activism. In this argument, SMOs are depicted as relatively formal and often hierarchical organizations (McCarthy and Zald 1977: 1218) that have explicit and established rules and procedures governing group operations, membership criteria, designated



processes by which individuals can join or leave the group, clearly defined positions that clarify the roles and responsibilities of their members, and a way to sustain the organization without relying on the participation or leadership of specific individuals.

The resource aggregator advantage that SMOs have can manifest in several ways. Individual supporters of a social movement bring some resources with them – their labor, for example, or access to a car, or knowledge of web design. As individuals, their resources may not add up to much, but if they pool their resources with other like-minded individuals, they can start to make a difference. SMOs can facilitate this pooling process, thereby multiplying the impact that individuals and their separate resources can have. Moreover, organizations can access resources that may not be available to individual activists. The University of Chile's student federation, for example, receives funding from the overall university budget, which underwrites its various operations and initiatives, including its activist work. Formal organizations can also attract resources from sympathetic donors outside the movement, as civil rights groups like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) did when they received grants from foundations for their work (Jenkins and Eckert 1986: 816). For some movement groups, external funding can even comprise the majority of their funding (Cress and Snow 1996). Formal organizations can also take on fundraising activities more efficiently by utilizing their administrative structures to target potential donors.

Formal organizations can benefit from having well-developed administrative structures in other ways as well. They can give SMOs an advantage when collecting and disseminating information to their supporters, which can help them to both attract new members from the pool of potential sympathizers and make sure the supporters they already have do not stay on the sidelines but actually take part in collective action. The University of Chile student federation, for example, has a designated Minister of Communication as part of its organizational structure. This individual is in charge of informing the federation's members about the organization's activities and operations on a regular basis. Other federation officers also communicate with members, convene meetings, promote the group's work, and perform additional activities that make it possible for the organization to operate effectively. In addition, formal organizational structures offer clear points of contact for political



elites who might want to work with SMOs. Finally, formal organizations are better able to sustain themselves over time compared to ad hoc groups, as their rules provide clear mechanisms by which the organization's reins can be handed over to the next generation of leaders; such groups do not rise or fall with any one charismatic figure but instead are built to sustain themselves – and, in turn, collective action – for longer periods of time. This administrative advantage, combined with its resource advantage, makes the SMO a particularly effective tool for mobilizing people to take part in social movements (Sawyers and Meyer 1999).

There is, however, no single model of SMO that exists across movements; organizations vary considerably in how they structure their operations and, in turn, their operational cultures (Tarrow 2011: 138). Some have a narrow issue focus, while others have more sweeping mandates. Some are local, others are national, and still others have a transnational reach. SMOs can differ in their membership model, with “inclusive” groups prioritizing the number of members, even though those members may play little day-to-day role in operations and little may be asked of them in terms of making a commitment to the organization; “exclusive” groups, on the other hand, prioritize having a smaller number of highly committed members who are expected to participate and further the cause whenever possible (Zald and Ash 1966: 330–1). Groups can be hierarchically organized, with clear chains of command, concentrations of power at the higher levels of the group, and less latitude for autonomous actions among the movement's rank-and-file members. But SMOs can also be horizontal in their structure, giving members relatively equal power and creating an internal culture based on collaboration, reciprocity, and mutual exchange of information (Rucht 1996). The Chilean mobilization featured organizations of both types: the student federations and CONFECH itself were largely horizontal in orientation, stressing participatory norms and giving members ample opportunities to shape the confederation's strategies and tactics; the leaders of the movements served more as the organization's emissaries instead of exerting control over the group (Somma 2012: 303). The students' labor union ally, the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores de Chile (CUT), on the other hand, was far more hierarchically organized, with considerable decision and policy power vested in a small group of people at the head of the organization, and a far more limited, indirect voice for union members (Bensusán 2016).

All of these variations – which are a function of resource availability, general movement environment, and organization-specific histories (Kriesi 1996; Rucht 1996; McAdam 2004) – can exist simultaneously within the same movement or even within a single SMO as it evolves over time. Although these differences do not prevent dissimilar groups from working with each other, these organizational structures do carry with them distinct strengths and weaknesses, suggesting that different organizational forms may be better suited to carrying out particular types of movement tasks. Horizontal organizations, thanks to their commitment to broad participation and consultation with members, have more extensive decision-making procedures, which can take considerable time; hierarchical organizations, on the other hand, can reach a consensus more swiftly, but since their decisions are made by a relatively small group, can potentially lack broad buy-in from their rank-and-file members. These diversities of form all underscore the point that there is no universal model of a social movement organization, and that different groups can structure their internal operations and relationships with members in various ways while engaging in collective action as part of a social movement.

This variety of organizational forms invites questions about why certain organizational structures might emerge at particular times or come to predominate in a particular movement. In her study of women's and minority organizations in the United States, Debra Minkoff (1994) found, for example, that the initial growth of groups specializing in service provision later generated growth in groups that focused more on protest. However, over time, both service providers and protest groups gave way to advocacy organizations, which came to overshadow these other groups. To make sense of this pattern, Minkoff and other scholars have drawn on density-dependence theory (Minkoff 1994, 1995, 1997; Carroll and Hannan 2000; Olzak and Ryo 2007). This theory holds that when movements are in their infancy, they may consist of only a small number of organizations; when new organizations emerge in this early period, they tend to be built based on whatever organizational structures already exist and seem to function well. Familiar organizational forms dominate because newcomers tend to imitate existing models; groups that survive and thrive – in part because they appeal to external elites, patrons, and possible members – provide a template for others who wish to do the same. By contrast, new and unfamiliar organizational forms will have a harder time being



perceived as legitimate and finding their footing and the resources necessary to survive (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978).

While this process can replicate dominant organizational forms and crowd out other types of social movement groups, imitation can also lead to a point of diminishing returns. In early phases of organizational growth, imitating a proven organizational model can confer legitimacy on new groups and lengthen their life span. But, over time, the multiplicity of similar groups can start to increase the intra-movement competition over resources. In time, this competition decreases the rate at which new organizations will be created as well as shortening the life span of the weaker movement groups (Olzak and Ryo 2007). As Minkoff (1994) documented, it can also lead to the diversification of movement organizations, as once-dominant organizational types create space for new organizational types to emerge. Although this process is not the only way in which movement organizations can evolve, it highlights one of the mechanisms by which we can try to understand how groups establish legitimacy, survive (or not), and adapt to changing movement and external circumstances.

### *Formalization versus Disruption*

Given these different types of organizations that are possible, scholars (and activists) disagree on whether a particular type of group is most effective as an agent of change. On one side of this debate are those who observe that, as movement groups persist over time, they tend to become more formalized and more professional. This pattern, Debra Minkoff and John McCarthy (2005) note, is observable among movement groups at the national, state, and even local level. Movement organizations that evolve into more formal and professional entities tend to have full-time paid staff rather than relying on the labor of volunteers. They also tend to shed members, moving away from a mass membership model based on constituents who are themselves beneficiaries to "paper memberships" and resources drawn from those outside the movement (Staggenborg 1988: 587). This combination of formalization and professionalization, in turn, shapes the way that movement organizations operate and their resilience through difficult times. In her work on professionalization in pro-choice movement groups, Suzanne Staggenborg (1988) found that formalized organizations run by experienced, full-time, paid staff tended to prefer more institutionalized tactics and

eschewed disruptive, direct-action methods. Having a paid, professional staff also enabled formalized organizations to establish and maintain contacts with other groups, making it possible to forge strategic coalitions with other like-minded entities. And finally, the turn to professional leadership and formal organizations also encouraged the groups in Staggenborg's study to take on tasks aimed at expanding and maintaining organizational influence. Such work as writing grants, cultivating donors, or enlarging the number of people on mailing lists, enabled continuity and stability and, in turn, made it easier for professional-led formal groups to survive the ups and downs of advocacy work. Such structures can pay off in other ways as well. William Gamson (1990) found, for example, that the most successful SMOs in his study were highly centralized and hierarchal, attributes that helped keep organizations united and focused on a common goal.

While formalization and professionalization can be advantageous, some scholars argue that they can ultimately detract from the core mission that animates social movements in the first place. This dynamic, observed by German sociologist Robert Michel and termed "the iron law of oligarchy," unfolds as "the very process of organization implied a separation of leaders from the rank and file, growing self-interest of the organization, and eventually an abandonment of the characteristics of a social movement, including its determination to strive for social change" (Rucht 1999: 152). In other words, as organizations become more professional and formal, energies that would previously be directed toward actual protest, advocacy, or service provision instead become diverted toward organizational-maintenance goals – goals that can defang a movement group, make it increasingly status quo-oriented, and ultimately unable (or unwilling) to challenge those in power as it was originally formed to do. The "iron law" predicts that, rather than working to effect change, organizations will increasingly work primarily to sustain themselves while abandoning their original purpose. Fears over this dynamic, in turn, have led some scholars and activists to argue that social movements should be wary of formal organizational structures and professional leaderships. Instead, as Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward (1974, 1977) argue, movements should embrace structures and tactics that resist institutionalization. Social movements, they argue, gain power from their capacity to disrupt; if formal groups gravitate toward moderate, institutional tactics, then the solution is to



avoid formalization and emphasize transgressive, non-institutional methods.

Not all scholars accept this dichotomy of formal-but-toothless versus informal-and-radical. Elisabeth Clemens and Debra Minkoff (2004) argue, for example, that nothing precludes formal organizations from pursuing radical change. Moreover, organizations are not inevitably committed to moderate or radical courses of action; organizations can learn, transform, and adjust their strategies in response to changes in the political environment, choices made by their competitors, allies, and targets, shifts in internal culture and leadership, and other variables that can prompt groups to alter their operations and priorities. Kim Voss and Rachel Sherman (2000) found this to be true for labor unions, which tend to be hierarchical and formal in their structure and operations but can alter their goals and tactics in response to changes in their strategic environment. Debra Minkoff (1999) found similar adaptations among women's and racial minority organizations. That said, the debate over how to balance organization-building activities with advocacy and protest still remains. Resources, time, and energy are all finite, and organizational structure, culture, and type can make some activities both more appealing and easier to execute than others, even though other actors within the movement may disagree about how to prioritize these competing demands.

### *Other Movement Groups*

Social movement organizations have received a disproportionate amount of attention in the scholarly literature but they are by no means the only actors involved in movements (McAdam 1995: 218). Hanspeter Kriesi (1996) argues that other important social movement building blocks include movement associations, supportive organizations, and parties or interest groups. Movement associations, according to Kriesi, include the array of self-help or voluntary groups that movements sometimes create in order to cater for the needs of movement participants, such as the mutual benefit associations of labor unions, which provide members with access to health insurance and social assistance during periods of illness or unemployment. Supportive organizations include friendly outside groups that may sympathize with the movement's goals and provide social support to participants but do not participate in mobilization directly. Examples can include sympathetic media outlets,

churches and educational institutions that provide meeting space, restaurants that provide free meals for protestors, and so forth. To this list we might also add informal or ad hoc groups that may lack the structures and stability of the main movement SMOs, but which nonetheless help to mobilize participants, as well as non-affiliated individuals (Oliver 1989) – people who take part in protests without formally belonging to any movement group, like many of the parents and siblings who marched alongside the Chilean students in demonstrations.

Political parties and interest groups can also be part of a larger movement. Even though chapter 1 sought to differentiate them from movements by emphasizing their insider status and use of more institutionalized forms of activity, in reality, these actors are often intertwined and each brings specific strengths to movement politics (Kitschelt 1993). Political parties, for example, can offer access to decision makers and input into legislative processes, while SMOs can deliver mass mobilization to put pressure on political elites and add urgency to movement demands. These kinds of alliances do not always materialize; in 2011, the Chilean student confederation intentionally avoided working with political parties in order to remain free of their influence and ensure control over their strategies and agenda (von Bülow and Ponte 2015). Earlier social movements in Chile, however, did feature such partnerships, as the pro-democracy movement in the late 1970s worked closely with the opposition Communist and Socialist parties to end Augusto Pinochet's autocratic rule.

Together, all of these actors constitute a complex and sometimes crowded social movement terrain, as figure 3.1 illustrates. In this diagram, we start with a movement that has multiple SMOs as well as other organizations and actors in it. Collectively, all these different actors constitute a social movement community. John McCarthy and Mayer Zald (1977) propose two additional aggregate concepts: that the SMOs of any given movement collectively comprise a social movement industry (similar to how all the automakers in a country constitute its automobile industry). In turn, all the social movement industries from this and other movements in a society constitute the social movement sector (akin to how all the industries in a country, including the automobile industry, would constitute its manufacturing sector). We might also include the wider concept of the multi-organizational field (Klandermans 1992), which includes all the other actors and groups connected to a movement organization,



including its supporters, rivals, and targets. Empirically, movements vary in terms of the numbers of formal groups and how central those groups are to the operations of the movement as a whole; some movements will have many SMOs, others few, and some may not have any formal organizations at all. Moreover, the internal composition and configuration of groups can also change over time (Staggenborg 1998: 186). Together, the activities and interactions of these different groups contribute to a movement's dynamics.

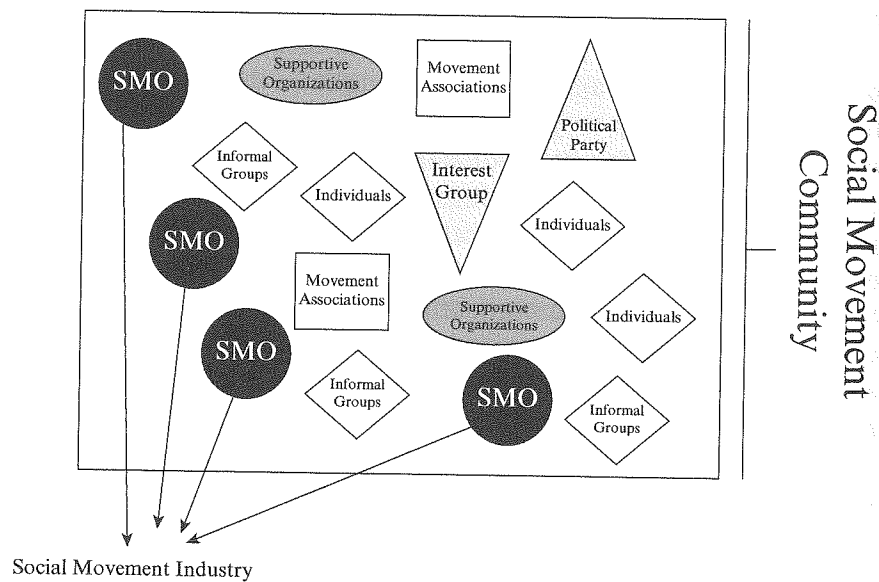


Figure 3.1 Social movement actors

### From Organizations to Networks

This conventional view of social movements with formal SMOs at their heart has increasingly been called into question by scholars on theoretical and empirical grounds. Theoretically, scholars like Mario Diani have pointed out that focusing on organizations misses much of the important activity within social movements, namely the interactions and exchanges that take place across the many networks connecting individuals and groups (Gerlach and Hine 1970; Diani 2004). Diani argues that movements

cannot be identified with any specific organization . . . rather, they consist of groups and organizations with various levels of formalization, linked in patterns of interactions which run from the fairly centralized