

State-sponsored social movements

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A state-sponsored social movement refers to a popular movement initiated and endorsed by the central leadership of the state and organized by the government's apparatuses. Collective action events are peopled by citizens in their capacity as nonstate actors, but the main source of claims, leadership, and organizational resources is from within the state itself, and state actors, in their official capacities, serve as the main organizers. Examples range from a daily ritual that the government calls for its citizens to perform (such as a pledge of allegiance) to a campaign of persecutions against its minorities (such as genocide). Oft-cited historical events such as the Nazi persecution of Jews in Hitler's Germany and the Cultural Revolution in Mao's China, are considered to be state-sponsored movements. Other less extreme examples also belong to the category, as will become clear when the concept is further clarified.

As a concept to describe the state's role in social movements, state sponsorship shares similarities with the commonly known concept of political opportunity structure, but it is also qualitatively different from that concept. They both belong to the group of conditions that facilitate the emergence and operation of a social movement. A movement is thought to be more likely to emerge, develop, and succeed if the system is open, the state's repression capacity is low, the elites are in conflict, and/or some elite members are supportive. For political opportunity structure scholars, a movement is seen as outside the realm of the state, and favorable conditions as constituting a facilitative environment.

The boundaries between the state and movement, however, all but disappear in the

situation of a state-sponsored movement. There are three distinct features in the interaction between the state and movement. First, the top leadership, or at least the prevailing faction of the leadership, is calling for the movement. This is in contrast to a movement that is initiated by forces within society. Second, the government provides the organizational resources – funds, personnel, office, for the movement. In comparison, in other movements state leaders and bureaucrats may be restricted by law from openly participating in their official capacities, and government resources from being used in partisan mobilizations. Third, leadership and activism are often rewarded with career opportunities by the government, while they may be met with the government's indifference, harassment, or even imprisonment if involved in other movements.

As such, given their close relationship with the state, should we just treat state-sponsored rituals and campaigns as part of institutional politics? To do so would be to miss what social movement scholarship has to offer. Like other social movements, not only do the campaigns of state-sponsored movements take the form of collective events, but they also draw their participants from among the ordinary masses. Once started, the movement may involve initiatives that quickly deviate from the state's blueprint. In other words, the state's initiation opens up the floodgates of other mass actions, albeit under the cover of the original goal. More often than not the state cannot police the movement into the shape originally designed. The result more resembles a social movement – with unexpected twists and turns in its course and newly constituted identities among the participants – than the prescribed routines associated with institutional politics.

While state sponsorship of social movements is common wherever there is a state, the character and volume of such movements

2 STATE-SPONSORED SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

vary through history and across different types of political systems. Before the separation of church and state, the religion of a country sponsored by the government might be understood as a state-sponsored social movement. But large waves of change in the past several centuries generated political regimes built on the claims of the “people,” as opposed to the traditional sovereignty claims based on the “king.” These newer regimes possess institutional affinity with the populace, and are therefore prone to mobilizing popular movements in their state-building projects and the maintenance of legitimacy. Among the popular-based governments, there is a marked difference between democratic and authoritarian regimes, however. In the former, election resolves a large part of the legitimacy issue; hence fewer state-sponsored movements. In the latter, the occurrence and volume of such movements are higher. Among the democratic regimes, transitional democracies witness more state-sponsored movements than more stable and mature democracies.

Given all the powers enjoyed through its bureaucratic and legal channels, why would a government mobilize popular movements? First, state-building is always a work in progress; this is particularly the case for a nascent government established through a popular movement such as revolution. In the course of transitioning from a revolutionary movement to a bureaucratic and legalistic state, mass campaigns become a routine and permanent feature of political life. Second, in authoritarian as well as democratic countries, the state monopoly of authority is by no means complete. Many authorities—church, scientific, commercial, educational, and medical, for example—reside outside the control of the state, in varying degrees. When the state attempts to compel them to serve the regime or to give up authority, citizen groups may be prompted to challenge such authorities. Third, the state may find its organizational resources to be in short supply, which is almost always the case, and voluntarism among the citizenry to be a volcanic source of power to tap.

Conceptually state-sponsored social movements can be classified into two types: promotional and persecutory. *Promotional state-sponsored social movements* center on ceremony and collective action that proclaim and rehearse certain values such as racial purity, patriotism, class conflict, and egalitarianism. These include public rituals in public squares in communist countries such as Cuba, China, Soviet Union Russia, and North Korea. These rituals are seemingly joyous and victim-free. In democratic countries, state-sponsored rituals also exist, as illustrated by Robert Bellah’s (1991) concept of “civic religion in America.”

Persecutory state-sponsored social movements are mobilized to remove undesired elements of the population, and too often take the form of state-organized purges of “class enemies,” ethnic cleansing, and genocide. The state promotes hatred and discrimination among the citizens, pitting one group against the other. In extreme cases, the state also promotes elimination of certain segments of the population as a solution of the “problem.” Examples include the Holocaust, recurrent political campaigns in communist societies, and the contemporary genocidal events in Bosnia and Rwanda.

Most often, a state-sponsored social movement is a combination of these two types, with one feature being more pronounced than the other. On the one hand, a state’s promotion of a value is rarely victimless, even in the most seemingly innocuous cases. For example, certain versions of patriotism are bound to differentiate a hierarchy of ethnic order, and to enhance hostility toward immigrants and foreigners. On the other hand, persecution is conducted in the name of a value, an ideology, and hence rehearsed repeatedly, as occurred with both Nazism and communism.

The tradition of studying state-sponsored movements dates back to World War II, when the world witnessed the rise of totalitarianism. The research peaked in the postwar decades, and the field of collective behavior studies, the predecessor of the social movement studies, was heavily built on the analysis of this type of movement. On the nature of regimes

and character of societies, scholars proposed concepts such as totalitarianism and mass society. On the micro level of participation, psychologists engaged in psychiatric analysis and proposed concepts such as alienation and authoritarian personalities.

Since the 1970s, for a considerable period research has shifted away from these movements to only study “good” or “popular” social movements such as civil rights movements, women’s movements, and environmental movements. The new paradigms in the social movement field rightly reject some notions drawn from earlier studies of state-sponsored movements, such as irrationality of participants and the totalitarianism imagery of the society. But in the meantime, movement studies suffered a problem of a different kind: theories were too narrowly drawn from only those episodes in contemporary America and other Western democracies.

Two recent developments may herald a new boom of studying state-sponsored movements. On the theoretical front, some proponents of the current paradigms have made a forceful call to study “contentious politics,” a concept that encompasses a wide variety of episodes. Empirically, many historic-comparative scholars now dismantle the boundaries between social movement scholarship and cases of contention which in the past may not have been counted as social movements. For example, the Red Guard movements in Beijing in 1966–1967 may be seen as prototypical state-sponsored movements. In them researchers have uncovered features commonly observed in “good” movements such as grassroots initiation, rebellion, factionalism, and tactical innovation. For another example, genocide has been seen as a campaign driven by genocidal state policies. In some instances, the nonstate actors in those killings can be seen as participating in state-sponsored movements. But recent scholarship has challenged the state-policy model and contends that perpetrators act sometimes more on their self-constituted identities than on their prescribed institutional roles. To the extent they are community actors, killing events can

be seen as collective action events, and social movement theories may thus have a lot to offer in understanding such events, even though they have not been traditionally considered as social movements.

SEE ALSO: Contentious politics; Cultural Revolution (China); Genocide and social movements; Nationalist movements; Political opportunity/political opportunity structure; Revolutions.

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