Mobilizing Democracy: Globalization and Citizenship Protest by Paul Almeida
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American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 121, No. 2 (September 2015), pp. 632-634
Published by: The University of Chicago Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/682157
Accessed: 07/10/2015 19:48

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Throughout the world, massive protests have been waged against governments and international financial organizations seeking to impose austerity and free market assaults on social citizenship. By why do these protest campaigns only sometimes take off? Paul Almeida’s *Mobilizing Democracy* seeks to answer this question by examining the largest Central American campaigns against neoliberal bids to privatize government utilities and resources, retrench social spending and services, and impose wage-threatening free trade agreements.

Across six Central American countries between 1980 and 2013, Almeida analyzes more than 4,000 protest events, and the evidence he amasses provides a not only an accounting of the protests, but a new way of thinking about them. More recent protests have diverged dramatically from the 1980s “IMF riots,” which had been previously documented; the newer wave has been better planned and largely nonviolent, though often quite disruptive. The largest protest campaigns are also based on what he refers to as “multisectoral coalitions,” including labor movements, teachers, non-governmental organizations, indigenous organizations, feminist and environmental organizations, and opposition political parties.

*Mobilizing Democracy* introduces a model to understand the development of large-scale protests in poorer countries generally. Here Almeida focuses on explaining the change in the form of the protests and why they are more prevalent in some countries and regions than others. The model relies in part on the macrosocial conditions of economic threats and democratic institutions. Economic threats through neoliberalism provide the main grievances motivating the protests. Democratic institutions lower the costs of staging protest campaigns. At the center of the model are the local “infrastructures” that support protest. Some are state created. According to Almeida, administrative infrastructures provide access to protest, transportation infrastructures lend themselves to road blockages, and higher education provides organizers and supporters for protest. Community infrastructure includes NGOs, labor-based associations, and local opposition parties. Finally there is strategic “capital,” which includes the various strategic capacities that communities develop through previous participation in protest campaigns. He argues that these resources are most closely associated with the multisectoral coalitions that are capable of contesting and potentially overturning specific privatization moves.
The degree and type of contention, and the model, are examined by way of the extensive data on protests collected by the author from local newspaper sources. Almeida focuses on larger protest campaigns, which are more short term than the more sustained actions typical of social movements of richer countries, for several reasons. It is easy to ascertain the beginning and end points of these mass protests as well as any immediate effects they may have. Perhaps more important, they are also more typical, Almeida argues, of the global South, where resources are more scarce. He engages in some comparative and historical analyses across countries in protest, and the events are also disaggregated by region and locality, allowing for more fine-grained analyses of the development of protest campaigns.

The bulk of the book provides valuable historical treatments of major protests in the Costa Rica, Panama, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, with a paired comparison of Guatemala and Honduras, in part to appraise the model. Almeida shows that the 1980s protests in Costa Rica, a leader in democratic institutions, provided a kind of model that was followed by other countries in the region once democratic institutions were better established during the so-called third wave of democratization.

Almeida’s historical explanation relies in part on contingency and unintended consequences. The main driver of differences in the degree and in the patterns of large-scale protest is state-led development from the middle of the 20th century. These provide various sorts of resources for contention, resources that are activated once citizens are not being repressed. The Pan-American Highway has provided a site of opposition, for instance, and sectors that were well developed during earlier development efforts often provide the bulk of support for antiprivatization mobilizations. In countries without such extensive development, protests are not as extensive and rely more closely on nongovernmental organizations. He also finds some differences between Costa Rica, Panama, and Honduras, on the one hand, and Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala in the role that nongovernmental organizations play in protests. The latter countries, with a history of more repressive regimes, require more NGO presence to generate the multisectoral coalitions.

The thinking, evidence, and analyses are impressive, though the book could stand to take the democracy part of the title somewhat more seriously. What Almeida refers to as economic grievances are threats mainly imposed by governments under international pressure—politically generated grievances or policy threats, which accentuate political responses, unlike business-cycle swings. Moreover, although Almeida notes that the impact of these protests is closely connected to their size, given their reactive nature and negative goals, it would be valuable to see more detailed analyses of when and why state authorities respond in which ways. Also, he indicates
that Left parties play a large role in protests in some of these countries, but it would be helpful to learn more about their linkages with movement and civil society groups and potential longer-term influence over neoliberal policies.

But these are mainly issues for further study, and none of them takes away from this very valuable and impressive treatment of antiprivatization protests in Central America. Almeida’s account provides a new image of protest in poorer countries over the last generation that seems likely to persist, and his model should be considered closely by scholars seeking to make sense of protest outside Central America. For anyone hoping to understand worldwide protests against privatization and retrenchment, Mobilizing Democracy is essential reading.


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_Grassroots for Hire_ takes a mixed-methods approach to studying the ways that public affairs campaigns are commercializing and professionalizing what the author calls “popular participation.” Specifically, the author aims to understand how public affairs consultants became public mobilization consultants, targeting citizens to engage in specific campaigns, and the social implications of these practices. The book is thoroughly researched and contributes to the small but growing literature that aims to connect the work on contentious politics and social movements to that on electoral campaigns and institutional politics. As such, Edward T. Walker has composed a welcome addition to the literature.

Theoretically, this book builds on diverse perspectives from the social movements, political sociology, organizational theory, political science, and nonprofit-studies perspectives. It is impressive how the author weaves together these many strands of literature to present the theoretical basis of the book. However, with such a broad frame, the author has to work very hard to situate his contribution within all of these literatures. Perhaps as a result, there are parts where he goes into more detail than is necessary. In general, the book would have benefited from a narrower focus that enabled the author to develop his argument in more depth while providing more information and details about the research methods employed.

The book integrates extensive data culled from a directory of professional political services, a survey of consulting firms, analysis of website...