



## Partecipazione e Conflitto

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 15(3) 2022: 967-969

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v15i3p967

Published 15 November, 2022

Work licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non commercial-Share alike 3.0 Italian License

## SYMPOSIUM/3

### Notes on Sidney Tarrow's Movements and Parties

Donatella della Porta

*Scuola Normale Superiore*

A typical and admirable path in Sid's work is to start with a theoretical interest in filling a gap in the understanding of contentious politics and continue then by applying the novel theoretical insights in attempts to make sense of a relevant social and political problem. In fact, as he has explicitly argued, a most important criteria in sampling for in-depth case studies is the social relevance of a particular phenomenon.

I see this important book as following that path. First, the analysis of contentious politics has always connected it to routine politics, looking at the impact of political opportunities on cycles of protest as well as at what residuates from these intense moments of contestation. Political parties as allies and opponents play a most important role for social movements, as actors 'at the gate', channeling or contrasting their claims within institutions. More recently with the aim of making the analysis more relational and processual, Sid, together with Doug McAdam, have engaged in a reflection on the various patterns of reciprocal influence between movements and parties. In my view, this most recent book of prolific Sid empirically tests those theoretical reflections by engaging with a most important puzzle, that I see as driving the entire enterprise: how did it happen that, one considered as the main example of democratic and republic values, the US have become a symbol of democratic backsliding and unciviness? How is it possible that, after the presidency of Barak Obama, considered as the moment of full consolidation of the civil rights movement, a racist and authoritarian president, such as Donald Trump, could be elected? Especially, which are the insights that an analysis of the relations between parties and movements might contribute in order to address that puzzle?

In this sense, Sid as a comparatist (that often in US means a non-Americanist) uses reflections from social movement studies to understand American politics. He does this by using a long term historical perspective as well as by addressing at the same time the Left and the Right of the political spectrum and their interactions. A most important contribution of this book is in fact the reasoning on the ways in which transformation in the party systems, triggered at times by progressive social movements and at times by regressive ones, impact upon the Democratic and the Republican parties and then in the respective movements. While the hollowing out of political parties is presented as a development shared by both parties, the reforms on the selection of candidates as well as on the private donation to party leaders have produced different effects on the two sides, with a layering out of movements' presence in the Democratic party and the occupation instead of the Republican party by the ultraconservative radical right. Horizontal

versus vertical mechanisms of hybridization are conceptualized in order to distinguish the relations between parties and movements in the two cases.

The analysis of the evolution of the relations between movements and parties in the American history is per se a great achievement that indeed contributes important insights for the understanding of the mentioned puzzles. In addition, the volume triggers reflections on the insights that the analysis of the US case brings about for other countries and historical periods. These refers, in my mind, especially to:

- a) The effects of the hollowing out of parties on social movements
- b) The effects of polarization, considered in its 'asymmetric' version as a synonymous for the radicalization of the Republican party in the US.

While not explicitly expressed, a reading of the book would represent parties as naturally moderated and strategic and movements as, vice-versa, radical and emotional. In this sense, the party autonomy from civil society might be seen as typical of a sort of golden age in the American party system. Such an interpretation would reverse some main insights on party evolution (mainly but not only in Europe) that locate instead the golden age of political parties in a Weberian ideological mass party, which was able to drive what Bendix defined as the entering of the masses into politics. In this narrative, the pathological evolution is in the successive moves towards electoral parties and, eventually, cartel parties or what I called populist mainstream party model, characterized by a distancing of the parties from civil society into institutions, with the loss of party anchoring within social movements and therefore of party capacity to connect participation with representation. In this sense, the successive waves of movement parties can be seen as attempt to re-establish those connections. Building upon Stein Rokkan path breaking analysis of party systems as built around social cleavages, it is rather the loss of societal roots what triggers the hollowing out of party functions, not vice-versa. The main challenge to representative democracy is the decline of party membership and the high level of electorate volatility which follows from the weakening of party ties with social movements. Personalization, with an increasingly populist styles in the leader's rhetoric as well as in the leader-followers connection, is linked to the decline of the power of the party organization vis-à-vis the party in the institutions, with the creation of direct appeals to 'the people', often generically defined through exclusive ethno-nationalism (as typically expressed in the Make Amerika Great Again Trump-sponsored movement). While also in other countries the introduction of primaries for the selection of leaders and candidates has favored personalization, what seems more typical of the US system is the regulation of political financing which allows for an extreme level of influence of money in politics. In this sense, what seems most pernicious to me is not so much the influence of social movements on the Republican party, but rather the plutocratic tendency with private corporations and economic interest groups capable to acquire enormous power.

While Sid's stresses the impact of the fundamentalist religious rights as well as neoliberal think tanks on the Republican party, the emphasis on the party-movement connection might obscure the influence of other powerful actors. If Trumpism is considered as movement-driven, we have in fact to specify very clearly which are the specific forms and contents of the Trump's movement when compared to progressive movements. In fact, the dynamics and effects of Trump-in-power seem very peculiar given the role played by money and the control of important components of the system of communication, including mass media and social media. In this sense, if compared to movement party on the Left, the Republican party under Trump seems less a movement party that an oligarchic, mainstream populist one, characterized by the occupation of the party leadership by a demagogic tycoon that controls then the relations with his followers through money and manipulation. The dynamic of legitimation of the leader is based on authoritarian power rather than on participation. The pathological development is certainly linked to the support of powerful interest groups, with very specific interest that are at the basis of an extreme version of neoliberalism, with the hollowing out of the function of the state as social protection and an emphasis instead on extreme individualism. When talking of social movement on the Right, and of their influence on the right-wing party,

it is that is most important to take into account the notable differences in the organizational model when compared with the movement on the Left. In this sense, if the mechanisms can be similar, the effects of the interaction between parties and movements on the quality of democracy however vary a lot in given the specific characteristics of both actors.

Especially, the impact of the movement-party relations have to be located within an historical context which, in contemporary US, is indeed very challenging for democratic quality. The conclusion that the US is not so exceptional after all “The recent dangers” to democracy detailed in Chapter 8, however, make it clear that the United States may not be as “exceptional” as observers have thought” (p. 207), given, here as well, the hollowing out of parties, might be misleading if we do not consider some specific exceptional circumstance that made Trump’s challenge to democracy possible. Among them, I see, first, the degree to which money controls political decisions—the power of the 1 percent—while visible elsewhere, it is at exceptionally high levels in the US as the peculiar system of campaign financing allows for it. Second, this power derives from the support of a few, rather particular, lobbies, such as the ones belonging to the Koch brothers net as well as the National Rifle Associations with their own manipulation of uncivil society organizations. It is the policy success of these groups that challenges democracy through a weakening of the very state of law, thanks to the spread of arms—also used as threatened to be used by rightwing countermovements—as well as to racist and misogynous values. Third, both in the Republican party and in Trump circles a very unusual reliance upon politicized conspiracy beliefs of the QAnon type, developed thanks to the control of various means of communication, also represents an exceptional challenge to democracy.

In this sense, the reference to a generic polarization, or even to an asymmetric one, might be misleading in explaining the spirals of backsliding in the US democracy that seems instead entrenched in a specific neoliberal model of regulation of the interactions between the state and the market. Focusing on democracy first—as Sid seems to suggest—might be difficult for the progressive forces without taking a radical position on the needed structural changes. The manipulation through the spreading of conspiracy theories, that triggers extreme individualism and fear of the others, might in fact require a deep change of that specific capitalist variety by intervening to reduce the inequalities it produces.

Similar reflections are prompted by the short comparative concluding part with the illustration of pathological interactions between movement and parties in the Italian case, the positive case of movement-party alliances in South Korea and the open problems left open by the transition pactada in the Chilean case. While presenting very different historical cases as a test of the robustness of some causal mechanisms seems a fruitful strategy for case selection, a necessarily superficial reference to very complex and different geo-political areas and historical periods for confirmation of the results of a case studies might be misleading. In fact, the Chilean case itself seems to indicate that strong and radical movements might be needed to advance democracy by challenging socio-economic inequalities and that might require moments of polarization and tight movement-parties relations.