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J.P. Weismuller

Macalester College, jweismul@gmail.com

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Social movements and free riders:Examining resource mobilization theory through the Bolivian Water War

In *The Logic of Collective Action*, Mancur Olson introduced what has come to be known as the “free-rider problem”. Olson argues that, “unless the number of individuals in a group is quite small... rational self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests” (Olson 1965, 2). In the context of social movement theory, the problem is something like this: rather than paying the costs (police repression, marginalization, etc.) of engaging in collective action, it would be more rational for self-interested individuals to abstain from collective action and wait to reap the rewards of other individuals’ involvement. Consider, for example, a social movement seeking to establish a non-exclusionary social good such as nationalized water: a self-interested individual who did not participate in this social movement and did not pay the costs of involvement would, if the movement were successful, receive the same benefits as those individuals who did participate and pay these costs. In this case, individuals would gain access to water regardless of whether they paid the heavy costs of participating in a social movement.

This problem raises an important question for social movement theory: given the aforementioned cost-benefit analysis, why does anyone participate in collective action at all? Any account of social movement emergence must be able to answer this question; if we cannot account for an individual’s choice to pay the costs of collective action, we cannot account for the formation of social movements.

In *Resource Mobilization and Social Movements*, John McCarthy and Mayer Zald offer a solution to the free-rider problem. They argue that it is not self-interested

individuals which are responsible for social movement emergence; instead, they consider the key factor in emergence to be altruistic elites who, by contributing resources to social movements, make it possible for them to get off the ground. After explaining their position, I argue that their hypothesis cannot account for the emergence of entirely grassroots social movements lacking elite support. As an example of such a movement, I point to the Bolivian “Water War” of early 1999 to mid-2000, in which citizens of the city of Cochabamba resisted the privatization of their water system (called SEMAPA) by organizing massive and ongoing protests.

However, instead of yielding resource mobilization theory to this critique, I offer a supplement drawn from Olson’s original theory: because the free-rider problem is only a problem for large groups, resource mobilization theory need not appeal to elite support in all contexts; where movements emerge from “horizontal” networks of smaller groups, accounts of movement emergence need not be specifically occupied with the free rider problem. This means that resource mobilization theory can and should offer distinct analyses for movements emerging from large groups, where the free-rider problem requires the elite support hypothesis, and movements emerging from associations of smaller groups, where the problem does not rear its head.

In the context of the Bolivian Water War, resource mobilization theory can account for movement emergence by pointing to the dissolution of traditional union-forms following state implementation of neo-liberal programs, and emphasizing the way the death of these organizational forms made possible the small-scale organizations that joined into the most prominent organizing force in Cochabamba: the *Coordinadora de Defensa del Agua*. Such an account is consistent with McCarthy and Zald’s position

that “a rational answer to Olson’s paradox of the free rider lay in organization” (Tarrow 1998, 24), but goes beyond their approach by incorporating analyses of non-traditional and small-scale organizational forms into the structuralist model of movement emergence.

An essential distinction for resource mobilization theory is that between *potential beneficiaries* and *conscience constituents*. The former group contains all those who would directly benefit from a social movement accomplishing its goals. The latter group contains those that, though they do not stand to benefit from its success, still contribute resources to a social movement. Conscience constituents are typically elites whose support of a movement is a function of their moral sympathies.

Conscience constituents play a key role in resource mobilization theory for two reasons. First, because they are not potential beneficiaries, conscience constituents are not contributing to a social movement on behalf of their self-interest. This means that their participation is not contingent on the cost-benefit analysis that, via Olson’s argument, threatens the rationality of collective action and the possibility of movement emergence. Second, because potential beneficiaries are elites, they are in a unique structural position to help social movements get off the ground. While converting bystanders into supporters may not bring much in the way of resources, certain protest strategies can draw great resources from sympathetic elites, and may also lead these elites to legitimize the movement to authorities (McCarthy & Zald 1997, 1224).

These two considerations imply that it is not the resources of potential beneficiaries that affect the emergence of a social movement; on the contrary, when

larger amounts of resources are available to conscience constituents, it is more likely that social movements will emerge in response to calls for change (McCarthy & Zald 1997, 1225). By identifying elite support as a precondition for the emergence of social movement, McCarthy and Zald make the possibility of collective action contingent, not on the choices of self-interested potential beneficiaries, but on the choices of altruistic conscience constituents.

As Sidney Tarrow notes, McCarthy and Zald “agreed with Olson that the collective action problem was real, but argued that the expanded personal resources, professionalization, and external financial support available to movements in [advanced industrial] societies provide a solution – professional movement organizations” (Tarrow 1998, 24). The hypothesis that support of professional organizations is necessary for movement emergence “turns Olson on his head”:

Though it may be individually irrational for any individual to join [an organization] which already fights on behalf of his preferences, the existence of a [movement] made up of well-heeled adherents calls out to the entrepreneur of the cause to attempt to form a viable organization. To the extent to which the [movement] beneficiary adherents lack resources, [organization] support, if it can be mobilized, is likely to become heavily dependent on conscience constituents.
(McCarthy & Zald 1997, 1226)

By accounting for movement emergence without reference to individual self-interest or potential benefits, resource mobilization theory avoids Olson’s dilemma.

In its structuralism, resource mobilization argues that organizational factors have a greater impact on movement emergence than cultural or phenomenological factors. In one of its specific hypotheses, resource mobilization argues that elite support is a precondition for the emergence of social movements. In what follows I argue that this specific hypothesis fails to account for the Bolivian Water War, but that the basic

structuralist argument above is not threatened. In this sense, the following seeks to provide a supplement to rather than refutation of resource mobilization theory.

The case of the Bolivian Water War offers counter-evidence to resource mobilization's hypothesis that conscience constituents must be invested in a social movement before it can emerge in a broader social context. There were few, if any, elite interests on the side of the masses in the Water War: Bolivian activists did not have altruistic elites contributing resources to their organizations and *Coordinadora de Defensa del Agua* was antagonistic with political and economic elites.

Given that resource mobilization theory took Olson's free-rider issue as the basic problematic of social movement theory, it follows that, where Olson's free-rider issue is a non-issue, resource mobilization theory is not directly applicable. If in certain contexts the problem to which resource mobilization theory is an answer is not a problem, then, if nothing else, the theory must be applied differently to that context. Now, a major component of Olson's theory was that the free-rider problem only applied to large groups: "in small groups there may very well be some voluntary action in support of the common purposes of the individuals in the group" (Olson 1965, 3). One reason for this is that, unlike large groups, small groups are bound by ties of mutual commitment and solidarity. Thus resource mobilization theory's elite support hypothesis is not directly applicable to movements comprised of small groups.

In the context of the Bolivian Water War, the social movements that emerged in opposition to the privatization of SEMAPA were constituted by small-scale local organizations. These kinds of organizations, drawing on indigenous communal practices,

are rare in the American context. Moreover, the kind of “horizontal” organization of these small groups into “associations of associations”, or what Alvaro Garcia Linera calls “the multitude” (Olivera & Lewis 2004, 73), is almost entirely absent from American political life. It is perhaps for this reason that resource mobilization theory overlooked the possibility of social movement emergence without elite support.

The investment of multi-national corporations in Bolivian industries throughout the 1990s led to drastic changes in the Bolivian social structure: temporary hiring practices, integration of commercial with local artisanal goods, and the introduction of credit and savings began shaping traditional family-based peasant economies into more commercial economies. The traditional and commercial became “the two levels of Bolivia’s ‘dualized’ social structure” (Olivera & Lewis 2004, 67), in which subcontracting and short-term work slowly encroached on union-guaranteed salaries and socialized benefits. Eventually, neoliberalism resulted in the complete disintegration of the union-form that had been the touchstone of Bolivian social and political organization.

Yet, as Linera argues, “the dissolution of the conditions of possibility for the ‘union-form’ has, in part, also constituted the conditions of the possibility for other forms of social unification and collective action” (Olivera & Lewis 2004, 70). Though the unions no longer served as political mediators, no large organizations emerged at the national level to take their place. Thus Bolivians began looking to alternative organizational forms incompatible with the formerly dominant unionism. The experiences of Bolivian organizers provides some evidence for Linera’s view. Oscar Olivera, the celebrated activist who headed the *Coordinadora*, points out that the *Fabriles* (factory workers organization) began the organizing projects that set the stage for the Water War “as a

way of addressing the problems of contemporary unionism” (Olivera & Lewis 2004, 25). Their concern was with the workers in the “invisible sector” who, after the demise of the unions, were left without any social protection (25). Through its organizing work, the *Fabriles* became a reference point for people looking to participate in collective action. Moreover, its ability to coordinate discontent was a partially due to its deviation from the union-form: by speaking and acting out on behalf of all poor working people, unionized or not, it emerged as the representative of diverse elements of the population.

As Raquel Gutierrez Aguilar points out, “the movement in Cochabamba differed from earlier social movements that had been structured around trade-union forms of organization, which mobilized exclusively around the rejection of specific proposals or government measures... from very early on, [the movement] placed fundamental questions of politics on the agenda” (Olivera & Lewis 2004, 55). Importantly, the emergence of the *Fabriles*, which prefigured the emergence of the *Coordinadora*, was due in large part to the changes in social and political structures that undermined Bolivian unionism.

Without the death of unionism, the kind of “association of associations” that constituted the *Coordinadora* would not have been possible. The *Coordinadora* was able to resist the “easy pseudo-radical interventions” of “discourse professionals” because, after the end of the unions, Bolivians fell back on communal organizations. Thus for each delegate to the *Coordinadora*, local solidarities formed “a wall consisting of the responsibility of each participant in an assembly – in words, decisions, and commitments – towards his or her district” (Olivera & Lewis 2004, 73). In larger national organizations this kind of solidarity cannot be fostered.

Two points can be drawn out from the Water War case. First, it was the structural features of the Bolivian situation, specifically the consequences of neoliberalist policies on union organizations, which allowed for the emergence of the struggles that led to the renationalization of SEMPAPA. With the end of unionism, resources were able to flow to the local and communal organizations that eventually formed the *Coordinadora*. This interpretation supports resource mobilization theory's analytic emphasis on organizational over cultural and phenomenological factors. Contrary to the voluntaristic suggestions of other social movement theories, the evidence here suggests that the conditions imposed by social and political structures on the flow of resources to organizations have the greatest explanatory value for the emergence of social movements. This means that, whatever the other implications of the Bolivian case, it does not threaten the basic assumptions of resource mobilization theory.

Second, a theoretical supplement to resource mobilization theory that considers the unique status of small organizations and "associations of associations" like the *Coordinadora* would give the theory greater explanatory power without affecting its adept solution to Olson's free-rider problem. If resource mobilization theory restricted the scope of its hypothesis that elite support is a precondition for social movement emergence to cases with large groups organized in "vertical" movements, then it could use different theses to explain cases with many small groups organized in "horizontal" movements. Moreover, the Bolivian case specifically supports Olson's notion that small organizations function in a logically distinct way from larger organizations: the emergence of the *Coordinadora* from the *Fabriles* depended on participants being

bound to their local organizations in a manner unique to smaller groups founded on local solidarities.

It is neither surprising nor particularly threatening to resource mobilization theory that the elite support hypothesis fails to account for the Bolivian Water War. Since the hypothesis was created in response to Olson's dilemma, and his dilemma does not apply to cases where small groups organize around shared solidarities, resource mobilization theory is not compelled to stick to the elite support hypothesis in explaining these kinds of cases. Instead, by carefully distinguishing between movements organized in a few large groups and those organized by many smaller groups, resource mobilization theory can maintain its structuralism, account for the Bolivian case, and maintain its solution to Olson's free-rider problem.

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