Waves of Protest: Popular Struggle in El Salvador, 1925-2005

By Paul D. Almeida

Reviewer: Paul Y. Chang, Yonsei University

The core of the canon in social movement theory is based on case studies of movements occurring primarily in the United States and Western Europe. As Almeida notes, however, patterns of mobilization in democratic nations can often take distinct forms that are not generalizable to movements in developing nations and/or authoritarian contexts. As such, Almeida's book provides an important assessment of social movements in El Salvador, arguably one of the most important cases in Latin America.

Almeida argues that the key mechanism motivating "the outbreak and forms of waves of popular protest" in El Salvador is the changing political environment. (169) The El Salvadorian state abruptly shifted its policies towards mobilizing groups, from tolerance to extreme forms of repression, at two significant historical junctures. The first occurred when after three years of political liberalization, President Romero Bosque enacted in 1930 "new restrictive laws" that effectively illegalized various forms of mobilization. (43) This, in turn, facilitated the radicalization of social movements in El Salvador and the 1932 revolt that ended in "one of the largest acts of state-sponsored repression in the twentieth century in the Western Hemisphere." (46) Similarly, after a 10-year period of political liberalization (1962-1972), during which time El Salvador's civil society had ample time to (re)develop and nurture movement organizations, "a dramatic shift took place in state-civil society relations" (120) when the state pursued a strict repressive policy that revolutionized activist communities and ultimately gave rise to civil war in the country.

Utilizing extensive protest event data and rich interviews, and building on Political Opportunity Structure arguments (Meyer 2004), Almeida contributes to the social movement literature by offering a general theoretical framework for understanding the dynamics of protest waves in an authoritarian context. He shows that the liberalization of the state facilitated the founding and development of social movement organizations and that these organizations tended towards less disruptive protest tactics (what he calls "liberalization-induced mobilization"). When the state reverted back to extreme forms of repression, however, civil society groups drew upon the organizational capital developed in the liberalization period (the "organizational holdovers") to mobilize protests that took on much more radical forms ("intimidation-induced mobilization").

One curious dimension to the structure of Almeida's argument has to do with the agency of actors to influence the actions of contending groups. Because changes in state policy is the central factor driving movement dynamics, Almeida's
historical narrative begs the question of what is motivating the state’s sudden shifts towards repression. Almeida seems to suggest that international political and economic forces were behind the changes in the El Salvadorian state’s policies towards civil society. For example, the “rapid economic downfall” due to “the global economic depression” sparked the “repressive political environment” from 1930 through 1932. Also, in the 1960s, Almeida suggests that the “United States placed external pressure for political reforms” and this facilitated the “military government’s liberalizing efforts.” This period of liberalization lasted until the early 1970s when “the world petroleum crisis” refocused blame on the state for economic grievances which galvanized the brutal repression of social movement and labor groups. The war with Honduras also provided an external motivation to discipline El Salvador’s civil society as “tens of thousands of land-starved peasants from Honduras placed mounting pressure on the central government for agrarian reform.”

In short, Almeida’s explanation of what drove the waves of protest in El Salvador is predicated upon the agency of the state and its ability to mould the characteristics of social movements. In turn, Almeida suggests that international factors were the main causes of the shifts in the state’s policies from tolerance to repression. Following this logical order, one wonders if social movements possessed any agency of their own and what their role was in bringing about political and economic reforms in El Salvador. While Almeida clearly demonstrates the ability of the state to influence the character of social movements, there is considerably less exploration of the possibility of movements to exact change in the state. While this might not be one of the driving research questions of his study, without an answer, we are left with a unidirectional deterministic picture of social movement evolution.

References

From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline
By Fabio Rojas
The Johns Hopkins University Press. 2007. 304 pages. $45 cloth, $25 paper.

Reviewer: Robert A. Rhoads, University of California, Los Angeles

In From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline, sociologist Fabio Rojas effectively explores the key role that black nationalism played in the initiation, implementation and development of black studies as an academic discipline. Rojas argues that “black studies grew out