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SYMPOSIUM – REVIEW/4

STRUGGLING FOR PEACE: A SISYPHUS WORK?

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Sidney Tarrow's *War, state and contention* presents an important contribution to social movement studies from the theoretical as well as the empirical point of view.

First, it bridges social science literatures that did not talk much with each other—even if they had a lot to say!. In doing this, like many of his previous contributions, Sidney Tarrow expands the boundaries of social movement studies by facilitating conversation with important theoretical contributions on the general evolution of the state, on war and society. As explicated in the preface, the volume aims indeed at filling a gap in research on contentious politics as well as in research on war. As the author writes,

“I hope to show that the advent of war is sometimes driven by social movements; that movements often affect the conduct of war and sometimes change its directions; and that wars often trigger the rise and expansion of movements in their wake. I also wanted to understand the relations between war and contention in the global war on terror mounted by the Bush administration in the wake of the bombings of September 11, 2001”.

The references to seminal works on the development of state power as well as on the evolution of wars, their causes and consequences, will certainly enrich the debate in social movement studies on political opportunities—a debate that sometimes risks focusing on details, missing the whole picture of macro-transformations, their causes and effects. More specifically, as reflections on peace movements, but also on move-

ments in general, are combined with those on war and state building, and departing from the statement that states make war and wars make states, Tarrow provides analytic instruments to see (also) how wars make movements and how movements make wars (or, at least, participate in them). This paves the way for a more sophisticated vision both on wars and on social movements.

The volume also offers a strong empirical contribution on the generally little studied movements against wars and for peace, thus stimulating a reflection on their very characteristics, origins and legacy. Indeed, Tarrow compares pacifists to Sisyphus, cursed to forever push a heavy stone uphill that is bound to roll down again and again. With Albert Camus, however, he states that, besides the heavy burden and endless effort, many Sisyphus figures may well be happy purely in their commitment to do the just thing (as “Struggling to the summit is enough to fill the human heart. We have to imagine that Sisyphus was happy”).

A reading of this book, with its magnificent combination of historical and contemporary cases, is indeed extremely useful to reflect upon what is specific (or special) in the peace movement and its effects—a task that the research does not directly address and about which the Sisyphus metaphor, as fascinating as it is in Albert Camus’ version, risks being a bit too pessimistic. If all movements tend to be studied more especially in their moments of visibility, this is all the more true for the peace movements that tend to expand enormously during anti-war campaigns, and to shrink to invisibility when campaigns are over.

Looking at how many campaigns end, a pessimistic narrative could describe peace movements as a quintessential case of large efforts often bound to fail in the face of powerful opponents. Movements could not stop wars such as those in Vietnam or Iraq, nor could they stop world wars. Exclusive nationalism eventually prevailed over international solidarity on many occasions. Even left-wing groups ended up supporting military aggression. Nuclear missiles were deployed, chemical weapons are still in use, military bases are still in place (and expanding). Under these circumstances, Sisyphus cannot be happy!

There could also be another narrative to discover here though, one that is readable within several chapters of the book. The peace movement could be considered, under several respects, a very successful one. First of all, it sensitized public opinion against the use of military means to solve conflicts, and did so in a durable way. True, wars are still fought, and often in the most brutal ways. But, especially in democracies, governments seem aware that military interventions abroad are risky, that killing civilians is not justified, that violations of human rights will be fought in the streets and in the courts. After Vietnam, getting involved in long-lasting military interventions abroad be-

came a situation strongly feared by decision-makers. International treaties have been signed to reduce the arms trade and improve human rights.

Of at least equal importance is the fact that the peace movement has been very influential in its impacts on other movements which participated in anti-war and/or anti-arms campaigns. It spread first of all a prefigurative approach according to which aims and means should meet. Stressing ethical concerns, it focused attention on the need to change not only policies and institutions, but first and foremost ways of thinking and acting. Opposed to state violence, it promoted non-violence within a broader social movement family. Against militarist and macho values, it helped spark reflection on ethics and power within movements. And against aggressive nationalism it pushed for solidarity. Working around specific campaigns, it facilitated networking between groups and issues. In particular, it trusted and valued dialogue and consensus over force and majority rules, thereby contributing to experimentations with ever more inventive forms of participatory and deliberative democracy.

We can indeed agree along with Tarrow that while in the short run peace activists were often unsuccessful in opposing hegemonic power, “by organizing within vibrant and creative civil societies, they helped to alert the public of the crimes that were being committed in their names and pushed reluctant officials to end the worst of their abuses”. If “Civil society activism often fails. At best, it is hard, slogging, and frustrating work”, it is nevertheless “the only recourse for those who believe in the defense of rights against expanding state powers. Like Sisyphus rolling a stone up the hill only to find that it rolls down again when he reaches the summit, activists continue to see new and innovative forms for their struggles”. Which is also an invitation for us to continue to study these struggles in order to systematically understand when they succeed and how they fail.

A second, in part related, area of potential development is in the analysis of the conditions for the development of movements and their relations with war during state building and state transformation. In addressing this question, Sidney Tarrow makes a useful and convincing reference to the work of Michael Mann in his book series on *The Sources of Social Power* in describing state power not as despotic power, but rather as “infrastructural” power. As Tarrow reminds us, Michael Mann (1987, 114) distinguished between despotic power, as “the power of the elite itself over civil society” versus infrastructural power, as “the power of the state to penetrate and centrally coordinate the activities of civil society through its own infrastructure” (1987, 114).

While this reference seems potentially fruitful, its theoretical contribution is not fully clarified in Tarrow’s book. Lacking an agreement on the definition of civil society, we remain puzzled as to how the state actually penetrates said civil society and over the

consequences of it. On the one hand, this statement could refer to the capacity of states to spread nationalist sentiments even within progressive movements (making them supporters of the war effort, as has often happened in the labour movement as well as in religious movements). In this sense, movements—even beyond exclusive nationalists and religious fundamentalists --can mobilize in favour of wars, being influenced by the ideological power of the state. On the other hand, the statements could also refer to anti-war movements, which are certainly constrained in their capacity to mobilize by the material and legal resources provided by the state while exercising political and economic power. Finally, the state can penetrate social movements by infiltrating them, through its military power, the police and secret services. These different forms of state penetration of civil society could indeed be usefully thematized in further works.