

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Rich People's Movements: Grassroots Campaigns to Untax the One Percent.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5z7104tx>

Journal

MOBILIZATION, 20(1)

ISSN

1086-671X

Author

Amenta, Edwin

Publication Date

2015

Peer reviewed

Isaac William Martin, *Rich People's Movements: Grassroots Campaigns to Untax the One Percent*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. \$21.95 (paperback).

Winner of the CBSM Section's Best Book Award

Edwin Amenta
University of California, Irvine

Scholars studying social movements often seek to explain their causes and consequences. Usually, however, they do not have to ask why the movement exists. It seems obvious at least in retrospect that underlying grievances are severe enough and the institutional recourses distant enough that the rise of a movement seems plausible, possibly inevitable.

That is not the case for Isaac Martin in his *Rich People's Movements*. He finds that popular political campaigns supporting the rights and privileges of the rich have appeared throughout U.S. history. But why do these campaigns even exist? After all, rich people are by definition doing well, and so do not seem particularly aggrieved. What is more, they can use money to gain privileged access to the political process—they do not need to protest to gain the attention of political leaders. Martin also identifies a second puzzle in the typical activists in these campaigns, which do not typically comprise the extremely wealthy. Why would somewhat rich people engage in such extensive political action in behalf of the very rich people who would benefit most from the efforts, but who are sitting them out?

Martin solves these puzzles with arguments steeped in historical institutionalist thinking and the literature on policy retrenchment. A central point of historical institutionalism is that shifts in policy transform political possibilities. Policies create new political identities and interests, and any threats to these policies will strongly mobilize those who stand to suffer directly, while only weakly affecting and moving the bulk of the populace. Martin argues similarly that rich people's movements are mobilized by policy threats, notably those provided by proposed or enacted income tax increases. As with bids to retrench more redistributive policies such as social security, these tax policy threats impinge on rich people collectively and directly, with the benefits of increased revenue being more diffuse. So proposed tax increases contrast with the sorts of eco-

nomic downturns that often help to instigate poorer people's mobilizations. Martin also argues that these threats are not sufficient. Policy entrepreneurs are also needed to get these movements going.

Explaining campaigns would be enough for most books, but *Rich People's Movements* does not stop here. It addresses a second key question about movements regarding their influence. Martin finds that rich people's movements were sometimes influential. But that brings a second puzzle. Generally speaking, bestowing collective benefits on rich people is politically unpopular. When pollsters ask whether taxes should be cut for the rich they usually get negative answers. To explain this influence, Martin partly employs political mediation ideas in the literature on the political consequences of social movements. He argues that these campaigns had great impacts when the political system was dominated by conservatives. He also shows that although these tax mobilizations were failures, they were certainly influential insofar as they shaped the political agenda and induced like-minded members of Congress to press for substantial tax cuts through legislation.

Martin shows that these movements were more influential than most in at least two ways, especially since conservative dominance was a fairly rare occurrence. First, the antitax campaigners were able to use their resources to craft policies and funnel them to supportive members of Congress. Moreover, because only rarely did Republicans hold the levers of power, these organizations had to come up with other strategies. Specifically, they worked to dominate the Republican Party. This long-term project has paid the government-revenue equivalent of extensive dividends, as the tax rate for the highest income group has declined dramatically since World War II.

Martin supports his arguments using comparative and historical analyses. He focuses on five campaigns and locates the principal organizations backing them. He demonstrates why campaigns appear and when they are influential. In doing so, he leverages numerous historical and organizational comparisons in support of compelling arguments about the rise and influence of these movements. He also provides a historical narrative of these connected campaigns. There are fascinating stories involving the left-right political turnarounds of individual leaders—J.A. Arnold of the American Bankers' League, Edward Rumely of the Committee for Constitutional Government, and Vivien Kellems of the

Liberty Belles. The book is very well written and makes these developments if, given the often regressive results, not exactly a pleasure to read but certainly easy to do so.

This excellent book might have gone more into the peculiarities of rich peoples' movements. Although they have unusual barriers, as Martin notes, their goals are more easily achieved than those of mass mobilizations against moneyed opposition, and their routes to influence are somewhat different. Achieving tax cuts in the U.S. setting is not hard as most movement goals. As Martin rightly notes, the so-called Kennedy tax cut of 1964 was enacted without movement influence, but Democrats have often proposed tax cuts to boost employment, as increased spending is more politically difficult. Conservative movements have better chances than most to dominate a political party since they do not contest wealthy interest groups or corporations. And although often influential, twentieth-century rich peoples' mobilizations were not particularly large—based on newspaper coverage, none would place among the top 150 movement organizations—suggesting that the movement aspect of these campaigns was probably not the main source of their influence. These earlier campaigns contrast with those of current Tea Party, which has had a much wider mobilization, and extensive backing from rich foundations and Fox News.

None of these quibbles takes anything away from the achievements of *Rich People's Movements*. The book deeply engages questions about the causes and consequences of movements and brings into sharp focus an influential set of movement campaigns that scholars have ignored. It also provides valuable new theoretical insights regarding the main questions about movements. It is must read for anyone wanting to understand the causes and consequences of movements and their campaigns as well our current political predicament.

Hank Johnston. *What Is A Social Movement?* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2014. \$22.95 (paperback).

David Cunningham
Brandeis University

An apparent testament to the renewed primacy of social movement studies in our contentious world, Hank Johnston's *What is a Social Movement?* arrives as the second entry (following only Richard Lachmann's *What is Historical*

Sociology?) in the Polity Press series *What is Sociology?*. Conceived as brief, introductory overviews of broad areas of disciplinary inquiry, books in the series claim an important niche. But they also face a core challenge related to their ability to move beyond a textbook-like approach to engage both students and practitioners.

In this respect, Johnston's volume is a smashing success, and a model for synthetic works that seek to bring clarity to wide-ranging fields while also demonstrating that they have something original to say to more seasoned audiences. The book deftly maintains a tricky balancing act—imparting our expert tour guide's own vision without sacrificing an air of efficient comprehensiveness. Scanning the index, one finds an inventory of concepts mirroring the spectrum of contributions in sociology's most influential journals (including *Mobilization*, for which Johnston served as founding editor). More impressive still is that he accomplishes this feat while also honoring his subject's dynamism, as expressed through the phenomenon itself as well as in scholarly debates over how it should productively be studied.

Early in the book, Johnston orients us to the social movements field, drawing on and synthesizing influential work while also crafting his own spin on how to consider and apply those models. His basic dimensions—organizations, events, ideas—are familiar. When situated within broader structural, ideational-interpretative, and performative "spheres," however, they adopt a welcome elasticity, subsuming an array of elements at the heart of recent synthetic approaches.

In a subsequent chapter titled "The Study of Social Movements," Johnston shifts gears to adopt a chronological tack on the analytic evolution of the field. This choice comes with at least minor costs—at times failing to fully position competing approaches within the orienting spheres established at the outset—though it does importantly allow him to adopt a life-course metaphor (e.g. the 1960s as the field's "tumultuous" intellectual "adolescence") that locates modes of inquiry within broader trends in the discipline, from early studies of crowd behavior to contemporary big-umbrella contentious political models.

This expansive vision is a real credit to the volume. Johnston's ecumenical orientation deftly locates his analytic dimensions within foundational sociological frameworks (Goffman and Mead, for instance, provide touchstones for considering identity issues), and allows him to show how the field speaks to neighboring disciplines (political science foremost among them) while deploying increasingly sophisticated