

**Social Movements and Political Context:  
interview with David S. Meyer**

**Movimentos Sociais e Contexto Político:  
entrevista com David S. Meyer**

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**Mouvements Sociaux et Contexte Politique:  
entretien avec David s. Meyer**

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**Abstract**

*David S. Meyer has dedicated his career to social movement studies. Theoretically aligned to the “political process theories”, his research gives emphasis to the connection between social movements and the institutional political environment in which they act, as well as to the synchronic and diachronic relations between movements. In this interview, Meyer talks about his main empirical investigations, among them, his study on the Nuclear Freeze Movement in the United States. Meyer also talks about the main theoretical contributions of his research and of the contextual framework as a whole to the study of social movements, Finally, the author talks about how academic research can contribute for political activism.*

**Keywords:** *social movements; political context; Nuclear Freeze; spillover; countermovements.*

**Resumo**

*David S. Meyer dedicou sua carreira ao estudo de movimentos sociais. Alinhados teoricamente às chamadas “teorias do processo político”, seus trabalhos enfatizam a relação entre movimentos sociais e o contexto político-institucional no qual agem, bem como analisam as relações sincrônicas e diacrônicas existentes entre movimentos sociais. Nessa entrevista, Meyer fala sobre suas principais*

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*pesquisas empíricas, entre elas, seu estudo sobre o Movimento pela Paralisação das Armas Nucleares nos Estados Unidos. Meyer reflete, ainda, sobre as principais contribuições teóricas de seu trabalho e da abordagem contextual como um todo para o estudo de movimentos sociais e sobre como a pesquisa acadêmica pode contribuir para o ativismo político.*

**Palavras-chave:** *movimentos sociais; contexto político; paralisação de armas nucleares; spillover; contramovimentos.*

## Resumen

*David S. Meyer dedicó su carrera al estudio de los movimientos sociales. Alineados teóricamente a las llamadas "teorías del proceso político", sus trabajos enfatizan la relación entre los movimientos sociales y el contexto político-institucional en que actúan, así como analizan las relaciones sincrónicas y diacrónicas existentes entre movimientos sociales. En esa entrevista, Meyer habla sobre sus principales investigaciones empíricas, entre ellas, su estudio sobre el Movimiento por la Paralización de las Armas Nucleares en los Estados Unidos. Meyer también habla sobre las principales contribuciones teóricas de su trabajo y del enfoque contextual como un todo para el estudio de movimientos sociales y sobre cómo la investigación académica puede contribuir el activismo político.*

**Palabras clave:** *movimientos sociales; contexto político; Paralización de las Armas Nucleares; spillover; contramovimientos.*

## Résumé

*David S. Meyer a consacré sa carrière à l'étude des mouvements sociaux. Alignés théoriquement avec les "théories du processus politique", ses travaux mettent l'accent sur la relation entre les mouvements sociaux et le contexte politique-institutionnel dans lequel ils agissent, et analysent les relations synchroniques et diachroniques existant entre les mouvements sociaux. Dans cette entretien, Meyer présente ses principales recherches empiriques, notamment son étude sur le Mouvement pour le Gel Nucléaire aux États-Unis. Meyer réfléchit également sur les principales contributions théoriques de son travail et de l'approche contextuelle pour l'étude des mouvements sociaux et sur comment la recherche scientifique peut contribuer à l'activisme politique.*

**Mots-clés:** *mouvements sociaux; contexte politique; gel nucléaire; spillover; contre-mouvement.*

Currently professor at the Department of Sociology of the University of California, Irvine, David S. Meyer has dedicated his career to the study of social movements. His works – not yet translated to Portuguese - are theoretical aligned to perspectives related to the so-called “political process theories”, emphasizing the importance of contextual features for the emergence, development and resolution of the political contention, as well as stressing the connections between institutional and extra-institutional politics (Meyer e Minkoff, 2004; Meyer e Staggenborg, 1996; Meyer, 1993b, 2004, for example). During his academic trajectory, he has worked with other important social movement scholars in the United States, such as William Gamson and Sidney Tarrow (Gamson e Meyer, 1999; Meyer e Tarrow, 1998).

In his early research, Meyer has studied the Nuclear Freeze Movement in the United States. In this work, he shows how political-institutional changes in the Reagan administration created an emerging feeling of threat posed by nuclear weaponry, thus, creating incentives for mobilization (Meyer, 1990, 1993a, 1993b). Therefore, this study suggests that the diffusion of moral indignation feelings regarding a given social problem or public policy that is strong enough to encourage collective mobilization is highly dependent on what happens inside the political institutions.

In more recent research, Meyer analyzed how social movements affect each other synchronically and diachronically. In those studies, Meyer suggests that social movements should be conceptualized as coalitions (Meyer e Corrigan-Brown, 2005; Meyer, 2004, 2015), and develops the concept of social movement spillover (Meyer e Boutcher, 2007; Meyer e Whittier, 1994), as well as insights for understanding the relations between movements and countermovements (Meyer e Staggenborg, 1996). Those concepts stress the importance of empirical research on the relations of conflict and cooperation between social movements, as well as on the contentious interactions between conservative and progressive movements.

In this interview - realized in February 11 of 2016 at the University of California, Irvine -, Meyer talks about his intellectual trajectory and the main insights provided by his research and by the contextual approach to social movements as a whole. In concluding commentaries, Meyer also talks about activist social science, and about how academic research can contribute for political activism on the ground.

***How did you become interested in this theme of social movements and started doing research about it?***

*DM:* The study of social movements has always been the main theme I have been interested in. It started when I was a young teenager with a focus on moral action from regular people to make the world better. I remember when I was 13 or 14 reading Henry David Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience”<sup>1</sup>. At this point it seems almost silly, but his argument in the piece was that you should not cooperate with a government that does unjust things. So, he said “I am going not to pay taxes to the government that conducts wars and allows slavery. And you have a responsibility as an individual for making sure that your cooperation is not making the world worse”. And that was just very inspiring.

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<sup>1</sup> See Thoreau (1997).

So, I wanted to study social change efforts from below. When I went to college, of course, I studied literature, because that is how I thought the world changed. I wrote my senior thesis on Thoreau and Percy Bysshe Shelley, the English poet, who also had a similar vision of social change. Then, I had this crisis of confidence as a senior in college. Shelley had written that the poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world and sometime as a senior I started doubting that. Maybe the poets were unacknowledged because they did not matter all that much.

And Shelley had written some great poems, but had this terrible poem that was directed to the working class, “The Mask of Anarchy”. In it the protesters who have been killed by the police win a moral victory and they smile down from heaven because of their commitment to nonviolence and the justice of their cause. That seemed unsatisfying. And I decided as a senior in college that I really wanted to study the social context of protest action and what *really* worked. That had me end up in graduate school studying political science, studying larger issues than just individual moral action. So that is how I got started. I also had a career as an activist. I was always engaged in social change efforts in high school and in college and that had dissipated over time.

### ***How did you become interested in the Nuclear Freeze Movement?***

*DM:* Because of the activist networks I was in, I was recruited to participate in the Nuclear Freeze Movement. The Nuclear Freeze was a proposal to end the nuclear arms race by having the United States and the Soviet Union stop making, deploying and threatening to use nuclear weapons. The strategy was to develop a mass movement around this proposal.

And I remember saying with the certainty and confidence of an English major “What a stupid idea. Who would ever be concerned with nuclear weapons? Regular people only care about things they can touch. And they cannot touch nuclear weapons. They care about class and inequality”. That was in 1979 and that turned out to be completely wrong. In 1982, a million people marched in the streets of New York for a freeze to the nuclear arms race. And I realized, and this is very disturbing, how completely wrong I was. That is how I ended up in graduate school.

I know it seems almost unamerican to say, but I had the idea that if you are wrong in something, you can explore and figure out where you went wrong, that you might learn something. So that is what I tried to do. I had also been determined when I started graduate school that I would do something relevant, something that was going on. I wanted to be concerned with the world around me. And when I was starting graduate school, the Freeze Movement was a big deal. It was everywhere and people were talking about that. So that is how I picked my dissertation topic and that was my dissertation and my first book. And I had no anxiety about the topic at all. It was just like “Ok, I am going to do this topic, because that is what is happening now”.

### ***And what did you find out? Why were you wrong about that?***

*DM:* I was wrong because the salience of issues changes over time and changes depending upon social conditions. So, even though nuclear weapons were not normally a sali-

ent issue, when Ronald Reagan took office, the salience of the issue changed. There were a couple of things that were really different after he came into office than they were before.

One, the cost of military spending altogether and the spending on nuclear weapons in particular increased dramatically. Two, the Reagan administration had largely disparaged and abandoned the arms control process, which had previously been used to manage the costs and fears associated with the nuclear arms race. So, there were no agreements and no negotiations that were effective and that was scary to people. Three, the balance of power within people who were arms control experts and the government shifted dramatically. There were always people who had more pacific ideas and more bellicose ideas. They fought and sometimes one side or the other was ascendant. And basically, the people on the arms control side were all purged from the top levels of the government in the early 1980's. So, arms control disappeared, and those people who previously gave advice to presidents were now forced to go to the streets, to talk to people. Fourth, the rhetoric of the administration was dramatically different from previous presidents. Even presidents who had very strong commitments to building up nuclear weapons and threatening their use were reluctant to talk in a cavalier way about nuclear weapons. That was not true about Reagan's appointees who spoke casually about using nuclear weapons. "Oh, we can have a nuclear war, it would not be that big a deal". "It would be a drag, but we could survive it". "Arms control is terrible, we spend too much time controlling arms, and we should just have more arms".

All of those factors contributed to an environment that made it easier for the Freeze proposal to resonate and the urgency of the issue to increase. And that changed the way I thought about the world. Because I thought that if you were moral and clear, then you could mobilize people for the issues you care about. I did not realize how public policy, the shape of the room and the political alignments affected the resonance of a message. And that has been kind of the orienting frame from my work ever since.

*I imagine that, at this time, there were already people theorizing about how political context affects activism and this must have influenced you on your research. Who were these scholars who were influencing you?*

DM: So, actually I came up with this idea before I actually read anything that helped me, but I was certainly not the first one to get there. I remember finding a couple of things all at once that were really helpful. Sidney Tarrow was starting to work on the cycles of protest and he was very big on political alignments<sup>2</sup>. Doug McAdam had written about the context of the American Civil Rights Movement and how political opportunities matter and that was also extremely helpful<sup>3</sup>. Both of them were heavily indebted to Charles Tilly who always had this political context approach to studying contention<sup>4</sup>. Then, I found this one book by a political scientist that empirically absolutely had this contextual approach, but the theoretical frame did not make sense at all. It was almost too early. She was writing before she had a framework to work with. Her name was Jo Freeman and the book was called "The Politics of

<sup>2</sup> See Tarrow (1993, 2009) and Della Porta and Tarrow (1986), for example.

<sup>3</sup> See McAdam (1986), for example.

<sup>4</sup> See Tilly (1978, 1993, 1997), for example. For comments on Tilly's academic trajectory, see Alonso (2012) and Bringel (2012).

Women's Liberation"<sup>5</sup>. It was a really smart book that she had framed social physiologically which did not make sense. But it was a really good book. So those were the four books and the four approaches that were extremely influential when I was doing my dissertation. And subsequently I tried to learn as much as I can from lots and lots of different people.

*This approach that gives emphasis to political opportunities in social movements activities got very popular in the next years in social movement debates. There is a metaphor that you use in your book "The Politics of Protest: social movements in America" that I really like. It says that activists are like umbrella salesmen, they can have good sale techniques but what matters in the end is the threat of rain. So, if there is a threat of rain, they will sell more<sup>6</sup>. What do you think are the main contributions of this political-structural approach to social movements?*

DM: I love that umbrella salesman metaphor too and I come back to it as often as I can. So, what is the main contribution? The main contribution is paying attention to the room in which claims are made. Activists are not always tuned into this, because activists always see their grievances as salient. They are people who have been working on the same issue heroically, emphatically, admirably for decades and decades and decades. Inequality, nuclear war, animal rights, abortion are always salient and are always the most important things from the point of view of the activists. And I think that this approach, the contextual orientation shows that those experts, the stalwarts, are not unimportant, but the real action happens when people who are not normally engaged in that issue say it is also important and tend to join in. And I think that is an important contribution.

The second thing is a focus on public policy, on what government is doing and looking at allies in government<sup>7</sup>. I would say those are important contributions. And another thing that fits in here is that, when Tilly first articulated what he called "the polity model", protesters were people outside of the government and outside of the mainstream trying to get in. And he later realized and said that in a liberal democracy the lines between insiders and outsiders are not so sharply separated. That in fact allies in government are really important to protest mobilization and matter a great deal. There is an interchange of policy, mainstream politics and movement politics<sup>8</sup>.

I think one of the real important things that Tarrow did for me is he had a paper that I had written, I was just trying to work out something, and he took one sentence and underlined it saying "This is a very good sentence". It was something like "What happens inside political institutions had a great effect on the protest politics outdoors". It means that the connection between institutional politics and extra-institutional politics is important, and Tarrow pushed me to focus on that.

<sup>5</sup> See Freeman (1975).

<sup>6</sup> See Meyer (2015).

<sup>7</sup> For more on social movements and public policy, see Meyer, Jenness and Ingram (2005).

<sup>8</sup> For studies on the inter-penetration between social movements and the state in the Brazilian case, see Abers e Von Büllow (2011), Leitão (2012), Silva (2015) and Silva e Oliveira (2011), for example.

*Besides emphasizing this relation between social movements and political institutions, you also theorize on the relation between social movements. For example, when you talk about social movements as coalitions, about social movement spillover and about the dynamics between movements and countermovements. Can you talk a little bit more about these dynamics and these concepts that you've written about?*

DM: Lots of academics who study social movements treat them as self-contained units. Some of them write about movements that they felt an affinity with. So, they write about the civil rights movement, they write about the peace movement or the environmental movement as they were separate and distinct. And partially from my activist experience and certainly from the research after, I saw that people move across movements depending upon circumstances outside. Betty Friedan, the great feminist, came out of the labor movement. All kinds of peace activists in the 1960's went into the civil rights movement. And some of those civil rights activists went into anti-war organizing later on. So, the idea that movements are not distinct and that could connect to each other mattered and I pay a lot of attention to that.

My initial effort was to explore how the feminist movement affected the way how other social movements work. As I was writing my dissertation on the Nuclear Freeze, the most visible spokespeople from the Nuclear Freeze were women. Some of them were promoting their very serious credentials as experts on the details of nuclear weaponry and arms control. And it is hard to imagine that kind of a constellation of activism prior to the feminist movement. So, I thought it was worthwhile to examine how movements influence not only contemporaneous movements but also subsequent social movement. And I was happy to start that work with Nancy Whittier who was, you know, a scholar of the feminist movement.<sup>9</sup>

*You are talking about spillover in this case. What about the dynamics between movements and countermovements?*

DM: I was really interested in the 1980's and in the 1990's in the anti-abortion movement in the United States, which had gone of a period where some activists were using violent attacks on abortion clinics. I was trying to figure out how they rose and fell and in what they did. And I saw that they were connected to the success or the perceived threat of the abortion rights movement.

With this tendency of people to study the movements they like, I thought "If a theory works for explaining social movements that you like, it should also explain social movements that you might not like". And the balance of studies in social movements academically is over-weighted to the left, and part of that is political affiliation, because lots of conservative have been really influential at least in the United States. Actually, we know that this happens in lots of places. So that was about how movements affect each other. Suzanne Staggenborg and I explored that issue theoretically, and empirically in the American abortion debate. And this has become something that I paid a lot of attention to over the years.

<sup>9</sup> For more works of Nancy Whittier, see Meyer, Whittier and Robnett (2002), Taylor and Whittier (1995), and Whittier (1997).

*Here in the United States you have a theoretical and empirical agenda for research on social movements that has been going for some decades right now. How do you think these academic studies can contribute to activism on the ground? And do you think this should be a main concern of sociologists and political scientists studying this topic?*

DM: I have always been kind of obsessed about that. For a long time, I was really, really disappointed that activists were not so interested in what academics were producing. But I understood that activists were not so interested because it was not so helpful. I have an idea about activist social science being all about picking questions that you desperately want know the answer to, that would be helpful to activists to know the real answer to, but not about picking questions to each a particular answer would validate your case or your cause.

I don't know if I have produced stuff that is really useful or not. I mean, I tried to talk about issues that I know that activists care about, like the shape of a coalition or something. I know that graduate students I have worked with have absolutely produced stuff that is useful to activists. Deana Rohlinger who is now a professor at the Florida State University, studied how activists can get favorable media treatment and she looked at activists that she agreed with politically and on others that she disagreed politically. She was my first graduate student<sup>10</sup>. And right now, I have a student named Erin Evans who is finishing her dissertation and she is interested in how reform efforts by animal rights activists affect mobilization of the movement and policies within science<sup>11</sup>. Both of them picked questions that were important for activists, but that were not invested in a particular outcome. They just really wanted to know the truth about these questions. And I just admire that. I think that is the way you get useful activist social science. I don't know if I have been so useful myself, but I talk to people and I try to tell the truth and I hope that that matters over time.

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<sup>10</sup> See Rohlinger (2002).

<sup>11</sup> See Evans (2010, 2016).

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