States and Social Movements
Political Sociology series

Daniel Béland, *What is Social Policy? Understanding the Welfare State*

Hank Johnston, *States and Social Movements*

Richard Lachmann, *States and Power*
States and Social Movements

Hank Johnston

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Social movements and protests occur within state systems. Their targets are usually state authorities who are in positions to make changes and reforms that answer protesters’ demands. While it is possible that protesters sometimes challenge nonstate institutions, such as university administrations or religious organizations, in the twenty-first century, the vast majority of protest campaigns and social movements target the state, which is the main justification for this book. Indeed, social movements and protests have become so common today that they are considered by most social scientists who study them as a regular part of politics – contentious politics is the term that is widely used. Nowadays, people rely not only on political parties and elections to make their preferences known, but also on protests, demonstrations, petitions campaigns, marches, and organizations that pursue their demands for social change. These are all important vehicles for how interests are asserted and defended in contemporary politics. This is the main theme that I will develop in these pages, that social movements are politics by another means – peoples’ politics, not elite politics.

The starting place to trace the relationship between protest and state is the emergence of the modern institutions of governance, a process that began over two centuries ago, roughly in the mid-eighteenth century. The structure of the eighteenth-century state was very different from the complex, bureaucratized modern states that we take for granted in the twenty-first century. Today, the state touches many aspects of our daily lives, from collecting
taxes to regulating the economy, who can marry, and what is in school textbooks. Moreover, modern democratic states are based on the presumption of responsiveness of elected officials to those they govern. All this provides fodder for a broad range of claims against the state and sets the stage for popular pressures through both institutional channels (party politics) and noninstitutional ones (protest and social movements). The premodern state, in contrast, touched people’s lives only occasionally. Life was mostly village-based and rural, and protests infrequently erupted when traditional obligations were broken or conditions became intolerable. Part of becoming modern was the state’s growth and extension so that it affected people’s lives more regularly and more broadly. In this chapter I will briefly trace how the modern state developed from premodern autocratic monarchies based on tradition and the interests of the landed elite, and – more central to the theme of this book – how this transition occurred in tandem with the emergence of the modern social movement. The bottom line is that we cannot fully understand the shape of the modern state without considering the role of social movements and protest.

When we look back to the autocratic agrarian states of the premodern period, for example Henry V’s Kingdom of England (1413–1422), we encounter state elites – King Henry, the Duke of Gloucester, the Duke of Bedford, and other nobility – who took the right to rule for granted and were not remotely democratic in their relations with their subjects. They drew upon power and wealth based on traditions and land ownership to enforce their rule, often with impunity. The idea of rulers being responsive to those they ruled developed alongside the modern state and, in part, was put into practice in democratic governance through pressures from those classes outside the landed nobility. This means that a good part of state development occurs on the fault line between the actions of the rich and powerful to preserve their privileges and those classes seeking greater say in how they are governed.

In this chapter I will develop the theme that a complete history of the modern state must consider the actions of the popular classes that, from time to time, exerted pressure on state elites through collective violence, insurrections, protests, and social movements.
Against elite interests, popular interests are given form and substance by collective action. Throughout the centuries, state elites have kept an eye on those they rule, whether they be the slaves of the fourteenth-century Inca Empire (only infrequently), rural peasants of seventeenth-century France (perhaps more often), or angry taxpayers in twenty-first century North America (frequently). But let us be clear: for most of history, when a ruler’s attention turned to the common folk, it was usually not from compassion or concern for their well-being or a desire to protect their interests, but for practical considerations of maintaining power and squelching the threat of rebellion. The long-term effects of popular mobilizations and protests have been to force the ruling classes – slowly at first and more consistently in recent times – to consider the popular will in state politics.

This chapter will outline the development of the modern state, its basic contours, and how popular collective mobilizations were an important force in keeping state elites open to the claims of ordinary citizens. Historically, they brought new elites who were more responsive – at least to their particular constituency – into the state system, thereby institutionalizing changes that made the state more accessible to ever-widening circles. Although this is usually not the intended consequence of social movements, to this day they continue to bring new challenging groups, new ideas, new coalitions, and new interests into today’s system, such that the strong undemocratic tendencies are often mitigated to the extent that social movements mobilize.

The emergence of the modern state

What exactly is the state? In intellectual history, the state has often been approached from an abstract, philosophical perspective that asks questions about its ideal form, its essence, and why it exists at all. Some of the most influential thinking along these lines occurred during the Enlightenment, a Western intellectual movement that roughly spanned the eighteenth century. This was when the seeds of the modern state were just budding, and Enlightenment ideas
provided the food and water for the early sprouts. Central among them was the idea that the state was a contract entered into by members of society. Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), for example, proposed that individuals naturally sought their own interests, and it was the contractual provision of the state that prevented “war of all against all.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) saw the state as the basis of the common good of its members. In his treatise, *Social Contract*, Rousseau offered the vision of universal participation of all citizens in the state, a radical notion in the eighteenth century. Through participation in the state, and submission to its decisions, the individual benefits from the moral order the state sustains. John Locke (1632–1704) held that the state existed to preserve the natural rights of individuals, but, unlike Hobbes, he saw human nature as capable of reason and tolerance. He nevertheless arrived at a similar conclusion that the state was necessary for individual members to resolve conflicts that inevitably arise. Locke recognized that when the state did not do this, rebellion was likely.

Social contract theories of the state exerted strong influence on the political thinkers of their day. Locke’s and Rousseau’s ideas had a significant impact on the founders of the new North American republic of the United States, and animated the passions of many French revolutionaries in 1789–1790. But these concepts of universal rights, the social contract, and the virtues of universal citizenship are lofty ideas. When we get our feet back on the ground, and especially when we consider the historical evidence, the picture of the state is neither one of states insuring the liberty and enjoyment of all, nor people freely entering into compacts for the common good. Rather, one encounters messy conflicts among the nobility, capitalists, military, priests, and the popular classes. Throughout the course of history, the experience of most human beings was not one of freely entering into a contract to form a state, but rather that the state was simply a fact of life. They were born into it with authority relations already established, rulers over them who made demands and took taxes. For the vast majority of the people for most of recorded time, the state was given and inevitable, like death and taxes.
In fact, returning to our original question, “What exactly is the state?,” there is good guidance for the answer in “death and taxes.” According to less abstract and more empirically grounded analyses of state development (Moore 1966; Skocpol 1979; Tilly 1992; Mann 1993), the necessities of war and securing territorial boundaries were key forces in shaping the form of the modern state. Throughout history, the basic activities of the state – extracting resources, waging war, protecting your allies, or jailing your opponents – have all derived from the state’s monopoly of coercive means. Max Weber accurately described the modern state as having “a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (Weber in Gerth and Mills 1946: 78). Warmaking especially mobilizes the means of violence, and since the fourteenth century advances in military technology, such as gunpowder, siege machines, and artillery, have made warmaking bigger and more expensive. Because the security of the state was a sine qua non factor for perseverance of elite interests, the increasing costs of maintaining an efficient military forced state elites to be flexible in their hold on power, with two fundamental effects that shaped the course of state development by opening it to popular influences.

First, the composition of elite groups and their balance of power began to change in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the rise, first, of mercantile capitalism, and then of manufacturing and industrial capitalism. Previously, many European states were dispersed agrarian kingdoms, such as France in the sixteenth century. Monarchs exercised weak control over their subjects and relied on the loyalty of landowning nobility in the hinterland to maintain authority. Large and dispersed agrarian states always faced the threat that feudal or prebendal lords would foment rebellion against the king or emperor. Thus, the relative weight of wealth and power among the monarch and his various princes was delicate and contingent, and the stability of the state hung in the balance.

If we cross the English Channel to sixteenth-century England, the presence of a large commercial city, such as London, offered the king a source of revenue in the form of customs, taxes, and
loans to the crown that enabled him to maintain a sizeable army to counterbalance peripheral challenges from his nobles. Throughout Europe, growing cities – hubs of trade, manufacturing, and concentrations of wealth – could tip the scales regarding coercive potential, and therefore had direct impact on the international system (Tilly 1992). Given the high-level resource demands of warmaking – fielding large armies, building navies, casting cannon, purchasing muskets, and so on – the wealth of cities was crucial in the development of the national state. States with prosperous cities and large territories from which to extract wealth and personnel for warmaking had clear advantages over smaller kingdoms and city states. The wealth of merchants and capitalists bought for them a place at the table of state power. The rise of commerce and manufacturing, plus the costs of maintaining a credible military, made the state an arena for the playing out of complex interests, sometimes competing and sometimes intertwined – as it had always been – but now among new classes and status groups (Mann 1993). Power and influence were not granted freely or easily to commercial classes, and I have subsumed centuries of conflict, war, insurrection, intrigues, and assassinations under these generalizations. Also, let me be clear, this process was not some kind of early “democratic reform” of the state, but it did mitigate somewhat the autocratic rule of traditional elites and draw wealthy merchants and capitalists into governance both at national and municipal levels. As we move into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, more and more of social life became politicized, and parties formed to pursue the interests of different groups (Tilly 1993).

Second, prior to the nineteenth century, “states were little more than revenue collectors and recruiting sergeants” (Mann 1993: 504), organized to extract wealth and personnel to feed national armies and navies. It was through the demands of warmaking on the populations of these emergent national states – demands of conscription, of taxation, of billeting, price increases on basic necessities, wartime marketplace shortages, and more extraction through tolls, tariffs, customs fees, and stamps – that popular discontent accumulated. These demands often caused disgruntled
resistance, but sometimes they exploded into rioting and protest. Elite survival hung in the balance; for, if the state could not successfully wage war, elite prosperity and dominance could not be assured. As war became more costly and more common, there was a limit to what the popular classes would endure. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, we begin to see a dynamic between extraction by state elites (for war) and increasing responsiveness of the state to popular pressure (in compensation for state intrusion into everyday affairs). Responsiveness took various forms, depending on where the pressure came from, urban or rural, upper or lower echelons of society. This dynamic, however, gave shape to both the modern bureaucratic state as we know it today, and, standing against it, to the modern social movement repertoire, also as we know it today – meetings, marches, demonstrations, and strikes. But first, we need to be clear about where the modern social movement came from, namely, how it evolved from the premodern repertoire.

**The premodern protest repertoire**

The premodern repertoire of protest corresponded to a form of society that was predominantly rural, local, parochial, agrarian, traditional, and highly stratified. State authority was quite limited when compared to depth of penetration in daily lives that one encounters today in the modern state. The premodern agrarian state was split between its local organization presided over by landowners and magnates, and its fragmented and limited national reach embodied in relations between the king and his local representatives. In this context, the premodern protest repertoire was local in focus, limited in duration, and often quite dramatic in how it took direct action about grievances and claims. It was also split in the same way that the state was divided between national and local levels. Demands, claims, and grievances were directed, not at the king or parliament, but at local authorities, whose task it was either to ameliorate or repress. The village rallies, targeted rural violence, and other unique forms of protest characteristic of the
medieval and preindustrial periods began to fade as the modern state emerged around 1800.

This general outline follows Charles Tilly’s (1995) analysis of popular protest in Great Britain, 1758–1834. The process is summed up by his general, three-part characterization of premodern contention: it is parochial, that is local; it is particular, namely focused on pressing issues such as food shortages or outrage at an arrest or press-gang conscription; and it is bifurcated, representing the split quality of the state described above. We can see the parochial and particular dimensions in a few examples of premodern forms that were practiced in various European regions. Grain seizures from the storehouses of merchants who were suspected of hoarding or unfair pricing were common. In these cases, community outrage was characteristically immediate and focused. The merchant might be subjected to public shaming such as “donkeying,” “rough music,” “charivari” (shivaree), “Katzenmusik,” or “haberfeldtreiben.” In donkeying, the offender was paraded through the village, often hooded, sometimes seated backwards, to endure the insults and missiles thrown by outraged villagers. Rough music, charivaris, or Katzenmusik were also public shaming rituals in which villagers gathered at the house of the offender to sing songs, make raucous noises, and hurl insults. In figure 1.1, the nineteenth-century Bavarian practice of haberfeldtreiben is shown, in which local male villagers gathered at an offender’s house at night, shooting guns in the air, banging drums and pots, hooting, shouting, and blowing horns to rouse him to meet his accusers. This was a highly ritualized display of community morality. Elsewhere, similar actions may have had a more spontaneous quality, yet within the bounds of community norms and with the same result. The offender became a marked man or woman, and the shame was considered unbearable and often led to exit from the community.

Rural riots and peasant jacqueries often focused on injustices of the landowners, unfair or burdensome taxation, and rising food prices. Other times, villagers expressed their discontent by property damage. A common action was the destruction of workhouses where the poor were made to work for local entrepreneurs as a condition of the pittance they received for support.
The injustice of such forced labor was apparent to local villagers, and they frequently attacked the houses and tore them down. Also common was the destruction of fences that enclosed fields that once were open to villagers, or forests that were a source of game. These collective actions clearly communicated to the local lord or magistrate popular discontent. It was their responsibility to take appropriate action, either to address the villagers’ demands, sometimes at the national level in Parliament, or, more likely than not, to punish them (or a mixture of both). In cities, contours of the parochial, particular, and bifurcated repertoire took the form of (much larger) crowd action against unfair market practices, such as incorrect weights and measures, or when shortages of bread occurred, food riots in which merchant houses and storerooms were attacked and robbed. Riots against customs houses and press-gangs were also common. Later, the breaking of machines by workers (called Luddism in England) was a particular and parochial form of urban labor unrest that often merged vengeance with other grievances such as food shortages.
Other historians have chronicled the premodern repertoire and its variations (Rudé 1964; Bohstedt 1983; Wells 1983; Steinberg 1999). Hobsbawm’s (1959) classic study of primitive protest and rebellion included the categories of social banditry and mafias, both of which reflect a time in history when state capacity was limited. I mean by this that there were vast swaths of territory that the state apparatus did not fully control. Social bandits such as Hereward the Wake, Eustace the Monk, Fulk FitzWarin, William Wallace, and of course Robin Hood (the legend, that is) were seen as protectors of the poor against the arbitrary power of local magistrates and landowners, but this was more popular myth than fact. The social-change goals of most bandits were quite limited. The same was true of the mafia in rural Italy in the nineteenth century. Hobsbawm considered some mafia organizations as antistate pressure groups that existed – again – where state capacity was limited. Mafias were built on kinship and pseudo-kinship ties bound by traditional codes of honor, courage, and hierarchy. In Hobsbawm’s view, they existed partially as a way to help the rural poor by protecting them from landlords and offering services, which encumbered them with a debt to the organization. Mafias were a premodern form of social organization that was strong enough to resist a weak national state. Hobsbawm notes that, as the Italian state strengthened, mafias became less oppositional and more an arm-of-state administration in remote areas. In a sense, the state expanded its capacity by co-opting mafia organization to its own ends.

Let us be clear about these patterns of premodern opposition: they were not social movements. There certainly was a contentious element in British grain seizures and French bread riots, which frequently occurred during shortages (Rudé 1964), but they were not directed against the state because the state as we know it did not exist. Rather than protests aimed at an impersonal state bureaucracy, premodern protests were embodied. They were directed at concrete individuals identified as offenders and/or whose personal responses could answer the crowd’s demands. They were immediate in that they coalesced rapidly around the local targets. Finally, they were nonreflexive in the sense that they
lacked formal organization and planning. This is not to say that they were irrational, however, in the LeBonian sense of collective madness. Premodern contentious gatherings no doubt were guided by the same collective processes that researchers of modern crowds and panics have noticed, namely, although appearing to be spontaneous and aimless, they in fact are guided by collective recognition.

The modern social movement repertoire

If these are not, what then is a social movement? To begin with, a social movement is a modern form of protest. It has developed alongside, in conjunction to, and in a dynamic relation with, the development of the modern state. Just as premodern protests were embodied, so too was the premodern state. The purest expression of this was Louis XIV’s statement, “L’état, c’est moi.” I am the state. But the French Sun King’s egomania aside, the premodern state was made up of personages – its king, nobles, princes, landowning classes, local magistrates, justices of the peace, and sheriffs – who were sparse enough and few enough in number that they were the state in the minds of the local populace. There were no police forces at that time, no traffic courts, no social security administration, no local government, no anonymous faces in state bureaus, just people well known to villagers or city neighborhoods with the traditional authority to rule, who exercised that authority with very few constraints except those imposed from their superiors. In this sense, the state was embodied in ways it is not today. As Charles Tilly (1995a) pointed out in Great Britain, the modern social movement repertoire developed as the modern state developed, starting in the mid-1700s and during the century that followed. As the state became more impersonal, so too did the focus of protest.

This means that today social movements target mostly the state to affect policy relevant to members’ interests. Beginning in the eighteenth century, as the state expanded to perform additional functions beyond taxation, customs, tariffs, and other forms of
extraction, it opened itself to pressure from citizen groups and collective action by (1) multiplying both the points of access – new bureaus, departments, and ministries – and thereby opportunities for influence; and (2) the number of policy arenas under the state’s jurisdiction. To summarize a long and complex historical process, the demands of state warmaking required more and more extraction which, cognizant of the limits the populace would endure, led to the state’s embrace of more and more functions it had previously eschewed. Tilly (1995a) points out that one arena was care for widows and provision of pensions for injured soldiers and sailors – a response to pressing more and more of the male population into the military. But this was just a beginning. Wartime shortages meant the state must involve itself in food supply and market regulation, not to mention the demands of provisioning military forces. Implicit in the state’s actions was the understanding that if it did not perform these functions, citizen unrest would mount, complicating warmaking efforts, threatening elite interests and raising the costs of social control.

However, the eighteenth century state was not yet in the business of granting wholesale democratic reforms to every village and town in the countryside. It definitely did not grant the vote to rural villagers and peasants in return for their acquiescence, but it was broadening the circle of those who might influence state decisions, moving slowly but steadily in extending the full rights of citizenship. Because the state needed support of merchants, tradesmen, and early capitalists and bankers to finance military expenditures and support the expanding state apparatus, suffrage was broadened in England beyond the landed nobility to include gentlemen of property. As a wider variety of interests were represented in Parliament, and as suffrage was extended to encompass more of the male population, citizen interest in and the relevance of national politics grew.

Tilly’s (1995) analysis of contentious gatherings during this period shows an increase in organized meetings aimed at public discussion of national issues to influence political decisions at the national level. We begin to see the modern social movement repertoire – one that we would recognize today – emerge in the
early 1800s, namely, cosmopolitan, autonomous, and modular: cosmopolitan in the sense that it was no longer about local issues but rather national ones; autonomous in that it was focused directly at the national level; and modular in that a package of tactics emerged, including marches, demonstrations, meetings, strategy sessions, petitions, all conceived as a means to put pressure on politicians to address movement claims, concerns, and grievances. Moreover, politics as we recognize it today began to take shape. Political parties vied for support among wider circles of citizens. Even those who did not have a vote often sought to influence parties through meetings, debates, discussions, marches, and petitions.

When the modern social movement repertoire was developing, suffrage was limited to men of property. In England, Catholics, women, and workers were excluded, but this did not mean that they were disengaged from political life. Across the English Channel, universal male suffrage was a right promoted by the French Revolution, and increased pressure on lifting property requirements in other countries, although, regarding women, it will be another century until suffrage is accorded to them. Moreover, as we discussed, John Locke’s ideas of inalienable citizen rights, Rousseau’s of democratic participation, and the American Revolution, brought ideas of democracy and citizenship to the foreground of public debate. The early nineteenth century saw an upsurge in political organizations, such as the London Corresponding Society, United Englishmen, the Revolution Society, among others (Tilly 1995a: 272), when just fifty years earlier, in the 1760–1780s, most political clubs were elite organizations composed of the propertied ruling classes. Workers too were forming local organizations, societies, and clubs to experiment with coordination on a broader, national scale. In the early nineteenth century, European and North American societies were a swirl of competing interests and multiple points of pressure and influence. In the midst of this fray, a social movement repertoire that we would recognize today was beginning to emerge.

Yet these are early civic and interest group organizations, and as such, not social movements. Social movements are aggregations.
They are made up of multiple organizations, as well as less formal groups, circles, and nonaffiliated individuals. Members and groups coalesce around an issue or grievance to make their demands known publicly, and show their force to representatives of the state in order to effect a change. The nineteenth-century Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was not a social movement; it was a social movement organization. The broader English abolition movement of the period was composed of numerous groups and organizations opposed to slavery. Recognizing social movements as complex aggregations captures the network quality of a social movement that Mario Diani (1992) has accurately identified. In contrast to premodern outbursts against local merchants or property owners, social movements are aggregate phenomena of diverse members linked by overlapping ties that become the basis of planning, deliberation, and coordinated campaigning. Groups and organizations must put aside differences so that a united front can be presented to authorities or opponents. The complex organization of a social movement means that its duration extends beyond an isolated action or the lifespan of a specific group. In contrast, premodern forms of protest, such as bread riots or angry crowds of villagers tearing down fences, were quick and focused.

Social movements challenge the interests of others, which imparts to them a political and contentious quality which can occur in various political colors. Movements often pursue progressive social change goals, such as environmentalism or opposition to neoliberal globalization. They can organize around specific policy interests, such as healthcare reform, or in opposition to a war. They can be conservative, as in anti-gay marriage campaigns. They can be racist and/or fascist, as anti-immigration movements. But in all these cases, conflicting interests are activated such that there is a fundamental, contentious quality that spills over into the political arena.

This interest-based quality of social movements should not be confused with normal politics, however. Movements are politics by another means. Historically, movements were organized to go outside institutional political channels because those channels were closed or unresponsive. It is common in ostensibly democratic societies today that politicians turn a deaf ear to the claims of
some groups (in favor of others) or are unwilling to hear demands about certain issues. It may be that protest is the only way that an aggrieved population can make its voice heard. This is also true in nondemocratic societies, as I will discuss in chapter 4. Because of their noninstitutional status, Charles Tilly (2006; also, Tilly and Wood 2009) has suggested that social movements must publicly demonstrate several characteristics so that institutional actors pay attention to them: (1) worthiness of the cause, to engage on the merits of the claims and to demonstrate the potential for even wider support of the public; (2) unity of purpose, to demonstrate perseverance, that the claimants will not disappear over time and to prevent strategic division by opponents; (3) large numbers of supporters to influence decision makers, especially in democracies; and (4) strong commitment among members to invoke responsiveness of the state. All these are elements of the modern social movement repertoire, sometimes strategized intentionally and used to gain institutional influence from noninstitutional means.

Movements vary in their ability and intent to display these four characteristics of the modern movement repertoire, with significant consequences. When committed groups cannot claim large numbers, they sometimes choose violent strategies to show dedication to the cause. Violent acts are also a way of attracting the attention of the media, the public, and policy makers. Activists who passionately feel that their moral claim is just may opt for extreme tactics to shock the majority of society into recognition of the problem. Opposition movements in repressive regimes sometimes use this tactic to prod the populace from their quiescence, as I will discuss in chapter 4. We also see this in democratic societies where small extremist groups in the ecology movement set fire to construction sites or sales lots of SUVs (Earth First!), and when anti-abortion activists bomb clinics and murder abortion doctors. For the broader movement, extremists can play the positive role of getting the attention of the public and policy makers when more moderate groups may not – a phenomenon called the radical flank effect – while at the same time bearing the brunt of state repression. Acts of terrorism sometimes follow this symbolic logic, as well as reflecting emotionally driven intentions to inflict injury. Thus,
questions of movement strategy reflect a complex balance among Tilly’s four components and other considerations regarding emotions such as anger, outrage, indignation, and resentment (Gould 2009; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2004; Flam and King 2005). I discuss strategic considerations in depth in chapters 2 and 3.

To summarize, social movements always occur in the context of the state. It is the basic premise of this book that the two must be considered together. We have seen this in the way that repertoires of protest have changed along with and in relation to the changing nature of the state. Moreover, both popular protest and the structure of the state are in a dynamic and mutually influencing relationship, each pushing and constraining the other. The state is composed of powerful political and economic elites who, in the pursuit of their own interests, sometimes act in unity at the state level, but, more often than not, pursue interests that are in conflict, producing openings for social movement pressure. For this reason I do not prescribe to the Marxist generalization that the state is simply an “executive committee for the ruling class,” or even neo-Marxist elaborations that the state exhibits some autonomy (Poulantzas 1978). Rather the state is an arena where conflicting interests of political elites, economic elites, state elites – the bureaucrats and civil servants that make it up – plus the additional element of popular pressure play themselves out in undetermined ways to produce particular configurations of state institutions.

Protest is a noninstitutional means of making claims or ameliorating grievances when state authorities, by limiting, ignoring, or closing off institutional channels of access, are not responsive to popular pressure. Thus, the modern social movement repertoire has introduced an additional player in the drama of state development, one that is complex, expansive, long in duration, and strong in special kinds of performances such as marches, demonstrations, petitions. But in the contemporary world, movements occur in different clusters of institutional state structures, which affect the shape, duration, and focus of mobilizations that occur. Let’s consider the different configurations for the modern state, with special emphasis on one – modern democracy, in its various embodiments – that are especially conducive to social movements.
As if humans were a species capable of perfection, I begin with the observation that there are no perfect democracies. Freedom House (2009), which ranks the world’s states in terms of various democratic criteria, places all of the West European and North American states, plus Australia and New Zealand, in the category of free, bestowing to them the highest ranking of 1 (on a scale of 7) for the categories of citizens’ political rights and civil liberties. (Mexico is the only North American exception in this group, receiving a 2 in both categories). These, of course, are general, summary assessments that gloss over several, sometimes more subtle, factors relating to how much freedom citizens enjoy in practice. For example, official corruption is an impediment to equal application of civil rights as well as to the responsiveness of leaders to citizen claims. Sweden, New Zealand, and Denmark all tied for first place in openness and transparency of government according to Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index for 2008 (Canada ranked 9, UK 16, and US 18, of 180. Mexico was 141, down there with China regarding corruption).

Even more subtle factors can enter into assessments of democratic freedoms. For example, while most of the states that Freedom House labels as “free” accord all citizens universal suffrage, voting rights can be effectively weakened by manipulating voting districts, a practice called gerrymandering. In the United States, voting district boundaries are commonly drawn and redrawn by legislatures to favor one political party over another by including some neighborhoods and excluding others. Both the Republicans and Democrats do it when they have voting majorities, and even though the practice is legal, its effect is to disenfranchise voters of opposing parties in gerrymandered districts. Another instance is the growing use of surveillance of citizens, especially phone taps, dredging email data, and the increasing use of security cameras, raising questions of who is watching the watchers. The UK is notoriously known as a surveillance society in the wake of terrorist bombings. Recently, surveillance cameras, which are ubiquitous in Britain, were used to double-check proper registration of children