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Abstract:
Social movements can have an impact on institutions by aiming explicitly at institutional change or by pursuing policy goals. In the former situation, their chances of success depend on factors internal and external to the movements. In the latter situation, the contribution of policy-oriented movements to institutional reform can be seen as a by-product of their action. A process of pressure by social movements and adaptation by the political authorities who grant the movements formal concessions makes such impact possible. The latter is usually minor in scope and consists of procedural-administrative changes. The examples of the women’s movement, which addresses both the institutions and the public policies, and of the antinuclear movement, which usually challenges the public policies, suggests the existence of a process of pressure and adaptation for both types of movements.
This article proposes a reflection on one the most neglected aspects in the literature on social movements: the study of their consequences. While there is a great deal of work on movement emergence, their development over time, their strategies, the relationship with their political environment, and recruitment processes, quite a few scholars, as some have put forward (Berkowitz 1974; Gurr 1980; McAdam et al. 1988; Tarrow 1993), have dealt with the impact of movements. Furthermore, researchers have primarily focused upon the effects of social movements on public policy or legislation, largely neglecting their institutional impact (e.g., Amenta et al. 1992; Burstein 1985; Button 1978, 1989; Gamson 1990; Gurr 1980; Kitschelt 1986; Mirowsky and Ross 1981; Schumaker 1975, 1978). Our contribution deals precisely with this aspect. In order to further delimit our field, we shall look at one particular type of institutional change. Generally speaking, social movements have two potential impacts on political institutions. On the one hand, they may provoke revolutionary change by subverting existing institutions. This situation is relatively rare, but when it occurs it has critical consequences and it changes the course of history. On the other hand, movements may contribute to reforming the institutions when they modify them without subverting them. This is a more frequent situation, but probably one that has weaker repercussions on society. Here we shall discuss the second situation. How can social movements alter existing institutions? This is the central question which will guide our discussion and that we hope we will be able to answer, if only in a partial and preliminary manner.
We would like to formalize our argument about the relationship between social movements and institutional change by suggesting a number of hypotheses:

1. Social movements are a potential source of institutional change. Yet, in most cases, they are alien to the dynamics which lead to modify the institutions (whereas they are at the heart of revolutionary change).

2. Movements can provoke institutional change either in a direct (that is to say by explicitly challenging institutions) or indirect manner (that is to say without having institutional reform as their primary goal).

3. The chances for movements to modify institutions, when they directly and explicitly aims at institutional change, depend on a number of internal and external factors. The most important internal factor is the intensity of protest. Relevant external factors are the weakness of institutions, the reformist behavior of political authorities, the structure of political alignments, the support by influential allies, and the position of public opinion vis-à-vis the reform at hand.

4. Most of the time, however, movements have an institutional impact in the absence of direct and explicit demands for such change. In this case, reform is a by-product of movement action aimed at provoking changes in certain public policies. Thus, institutional change is an unintended consequence of actors who have other goals, namely the goal of influencing government policies.

5. When movements bring about unintended institutional change, such reform can be interpreted as the result of an attempt by the authorities to control and appease popular protest. To do so, powerholders make formal concessions to movements without having to yield them substantive gains in given political domains.
6. Finally, formal (or symbolic) concessions may come as institutional changes which are reformist in that they do not concern the core institutions and have only a minor impact thereon. They usually are minor modifications located at the procedural and administrative level.

We shall illustrate our argument through the examples of women’s and antinuclear movements. We selected these two examples because they both are reformist movements. Yet, they differ in that, while antinuclear movements challenge government policies, women’s movements have also aimed at institutional change. Thus, by comparing them, we will be able to show the variable relationship between social movements and institutional change. Before turning to the empirical illustration, yet, we must elucidate our argument in some more detail.

Social Movements and Institutional Change: A Hypothesis

Social movements are sustained challenges to political authorities (Tilly 1978; Tarrow 1994). Most of the time, these challenges are not directed at existing institutions, but rather aim at producing or resisting modifications in government policies. In other words, movements usually have substantive goals with regard to specific policy areas. Authorities have a certain number of options to respond to movement challenges. They can ignore them, repress them, or meet their demands, at least in part. However, authorities often opt for yet another strategy: to yield procedural concessions related to the movements’ goals without meeting directly their concrete demands. These concessions may come as an institutional reform concerning the policy areas challenged by movements and are a way to appease the protest, a way which is often successful. As a consequence, social movement action, which only rarely targets at institutions, can nevertheless bring about institutional change. The latter, in this case, is a by-
product of the action of movements aimed at substantive policy change. This would point towards a latent function of social movements in changing existing institutions.

This process can be interpreted as an adaptive response of political authorities to the pressure exerted by social movements. Previous work has stressed similar dynamics. According to McAdam (1983), for example, the adaptation of authorities takes place in the everyday interactions between challengers and authorities, with the latter adapting to tactical innovation by the former. In the view of Piven and Cloward (1993), adaptation is a more general notion and it is seen as symbolic concessions to social movements under the form of a temporary expansion (followed by a contraction later on) of welfare spending. Other authors have shown that movements often obtain symbolic gains, mostly limited in nature and in time, such as formal or informal access to the political system, some degree of bargaining power, and so forth (Lipsky 1968; Edelman 1964). The idea underlying the works by McAdam and by Piven and Cloward, and which we extend here to the institutional level, is that powerholders often react to popular protest by adaptive behavior. Authorities, in other words, try to adapt themselves to the new conditions brought about by contentious action. Needless to say, adaptation must take the form of institutional reform rather than revolutionary change, otherwise we should speak of total defeat, not of concession.

Strengthening the adaptation argument is the fact that, even when they occur, reforms which have their origin in the action of social movements only rarely concern the core institutions of a given country. Most of the time, they come as minor adjustments which do not question the existence or legitimacy of powerholders. While institutional change is an adaptive response by political authorities to the pressure exerted by social movements, such adaptation will occur in a way not to threaten the survival of the system. In other words, it will
not deal with the central institutions and will not produce profound modifications in the institutions concerned. Changes brought about by social movements, for example, will more likely occur in the administrative arena than in the legislative or, even less, in the executive arenas. Procedural and administrative reforms, which have usually a low cost, allow the authorities to keep their legitimacy and the political system to continue functioning.

In order to avoid any misunderstanding, we should clarify two aspects of our argument. First, of course we are not claiming that all reformist institutional changes are to be interpreted as adaptive responses to social movements, nor that it is the only possible response to their actions. It is obvious that, in most reform situations, the crucial role is played by institutional actors - above all parties - and movements are alien to the process. Nevertheless, in some circumstances movements, either purposely or unintentionally, contribute to reforming existing institutions and hence are a source of social change. However, our argument is that, even when they do not attempt to modify institutions, social movements contribute to institutional reform because the authorities react to their policy demands not necessarily by altering governmental policies, but by modifying the «rules of the game» in the hope of appeasing the protest.

Second, even movements which do not explicitly challenge institutions have sometimes institutional goals. Nevertheless, we can maintain that the latter are secondary goals for these movements, as compared to policy goals. Most of contemporary movements’ challenges target government policies or the public opinion and aim at producing a change in one or both of these arenas. The institutional option, when it is taken, is usually a mean to reach the substantive end related to policy. Institutional goals come often at the end of a protest wave, when a shift or a diversification of movement goals occur because of lack of
success or, on the contrary, because the main objective has been reached. Moreover, only the moderate wing of the movement aims at reformist institutional change, which leads to internal conflicts on these goals, while there is more consensus over policy goals.

To go back to our argument, we may distinguish between three types of movements: revolutionary movements, institutional-oriented reformist movements, and policy-oriented reformist movements. While institutional-oriented movements require a modification of existing institutions in order for their demands to be met, policy-oriented movements focus on policy goals because they do not need to ask for an institutional change to reach them. Examples of institutional-oriented movements include the Civil rights movement, women’s and gay movements, nationalist movements as well as other emancipatory movements. To reach their goals - the social and juridical recognition of minority rights - these movements often need to provoke a constitutional change. Among policy-oriented movements, we find most instrumental movements such as peace, ecology, and antinuclear movements, which put a weaker emphasis on shared identities. Here we shall discuss the impact on institutions of the two types of reformist movements through the examples of antinuclear and women’s movements. We shall first compare the indirect impact produced by the antinuclear movements in three countries: Italy, Switzerland, and the United States. If our argument is correct, the cross-national comparison should yield similar dynamics of pressure and adaptation in the three countries, in spite of obvious country-specific variation due to different national political contexts. Then we shall provide a brief discussion of what happens when a social movements targets both the institutions and specific policies, if only because to reach policy-related goals requires an institutional change. Through the example of the women’s movement in Switzerland, we will try to show that our argument about the institutional impact
of social movements as a by-product of their action aimed at policy apply in part also to these
types of movements. In addition, this section will allow us to highlight the factors which have
facilitated the purposive institutional impact by the movement on Swiss institutions.

**Institutional change as by-product: the antinuclear movement**

Antinuclear movements have never had institutional change as their main goal. Their
challenges mostly target governmental policies, more specifically the nuclear energy policy.
Antinuclear activists ask for the abandoning or scaling down of nuclear energy production and
challenge the authorities on related issues such as security, emergency plans, and radioactive
waste. None of these goals requires an institutional change to be reached. However, as a brief
historical reconstruction of antinuclear mobilization in three countries will show, while the
movement has not aimed targeted the institutions, it has nevertheless contributed to change
the rules of the game, that is to say it has participated to institutional reform. In all three
countries under study, antinuclear movements have obtained major substantive gains, and in
Italy (and to some extent also in Switzerland) it even succeeded in forcing the authorities to
stop the production of nuclear energy. In addition to this substantive impact, antinuclear
movements in all three countries have led to minor changes at the institutional level by
inducing the authorities to change the rules of the game in the nuclear policy domain. Let us
discuss each country in some more detail. We treat the case of Switzerland separately in order
to draw a parallel with the example of the Swiss women's movement, which we shall discuss
below.
Nuclear policy in Switzerland

During the sixties, nuclear energy plans in Switzerland were adopted with practically no opposition. The first three nuclear power plants began production between 1969 and 1972 in the absence of antinuclear mobilization. Opposition started at the end of the sixties and were directed at the plant that was to be built near the village of Kaiseraugst, in the country’s northwestern corner. At the beginning, the opposition took advantage of institutional opportunities such as political and juridical appeals. This type of strategies became very frequent in 1972 and 1973. Several plants or plant projects were thus contested during this period. In addition to institutional means, the first demonstrations were organized.

The oil crisis produced a major change in the forms of antinuclear opposition. The relevance of the energy issue, together with the failure of conventional means, induced the movement to resort to direct action, in particular by occupying the sites where plants were to be built. A major occupation took place in 1975 in Kaiseraugst, which was to become the focal point of the Swiss antinuclear movement throughout the seventies and well into the eighties. This action, although it targeted a specific plant, became the catalyst for the popular mobilization and was instrumental in making nuclear energy a national issue. The years from 1975 to 1981 have been a period of intense mobilization of the Swiss antinuclear movement, in spite of two movement crisis, in 1976 and 1980. Many demonstrations took place during this period with the aim of stopping the construction of nuclear plants or the start of the production cycle of existing ones. Kaiseraugst and Gösgen were the two principal targets of the movement.

In addition to popular demonstrations and site occupation, the movement and its allies - the parties of the left - launched several popular initiatives, both at the federal and the
cantonal level. Direct democracy yields a major political opportunity for social movements in Switzerland. The antinuclear movement, like other new social movements, has made extensive use of such opportunity. The movement’s moderate wings, in particular, was very active on this front. One of the initiatives, presented in 1976 at the federal level, asked that the procedure to grant construction permits for nuclear plants be more democratic, through the introduction of a veto power for cantons. If accepted, the initiative would have practically prevented new plants to be built (Kriesi 1982: 33). This is apparently an institutional challenge. However, when we have a closer look at the initiative and if we consider it in the broader context of the movement’s mobilization, it can be viewed as a tactical move by the moderate wing of the movement in order to reach the substantive, policy-related goals, namely to curb nuclear energy production in Switzerland.

In 1978, the year the Gösgen plant started production, the Swiss authorities proposed a partial revision of the Nuclear Energy Act which was practically a counter-project to the 1976 antinuclear initiative. The revision would have introduced a democratization of the procedure for granting construction permits and new criteria for the acceptance of new plants. The result would have been that only those plants needed for the energy supply for the country would have been built. The revision, which was accepted against a popular referendum in 1979, made formal concessions to the movement without responding to its substantive goal, which was to stop nuclear energy production in Switzerland. As a consequence, three new federal initiatives saw the light in 1980. Two of them were launched by the moderate wing of the movement; one was asking for a stop in the construction of new plants, while the other was proposing a safer, cheaper, and environmentally sound energy policy. A third initiative was launched by the radical wing and asked for the prohibition to build new plants and to stop the
existing plants, that is to say for the complete abandonment of nuclear energy production. The launching of these three initiatives shows that the principal goal of the movement was to stop the development of nuclear energy and that the 1976 initiative was only a tactical move in order to reach this objective. The two initiatives of the moderate wing were rejected by the Swiss voters in 1984, while the one of the radical wing had been withdrawn in the meantime.

In 1987, after a phase of demobilization due to the failures of the movement and to a temporary shift to the nuclear weapons issue in the public arena, the antinuclear movement launched two further initiatives at the federal level. One of them was abandoned, but the other was accepted in 1990, also thanks to the Chernobyl-effect. It asked for a 10-year moratorium on the construction of new plants. In the meantime, the pronuclear right had proposed to abandon the project of the Kaiseraugst plant through two parliamentary motions.

What conclusions regarding the impact of social movements on political institutions can we draw from the example of the Swiss antinuclear movement? First, the movement has mainly targeted the Swiss government’s nuclear energy policy. Opponents were asking for a stop in the construction of power plants and for a scaling down in the production of nuclear energy. It eventually succeeded in doing so, at least temporarily. However, here we are most interested in the side effects on institutions of antinuclear opposition to nuclear energy policy. Pressed by the movement, the authorities have been forced to revise the decisional procedure for the construction and functioning of nuclear plants. This reform, which was introduced through the partial revision of the Nuclear Energy Act, can be seen as a by-product of the movement’s action aimed at changing policy. To be sure, the first antinuclear initiative explicitly asked for changes in the decisional procedure. Yet this was rather a tactical move by the moderate wing of the movement in order to obtain substantive gains. This interpretation is
to some extent confirmed by the subsequent actions of both wings of the movement: in addition to the 1978 referendum against the partial revision, the two initiatives launched in 1980 and 1987 clearly asked for a stop or scaling down in nuclear energy production. In other words, these popular initiatives targeted the content of nuclear policy rather than the formal procedures constituting the rules of the game.

Second, we can see that formal concessions regarding the democratization of the decisional procedure were quite limited in their scope. On the one hand, they did not concern the country’s core institutions. Rather, they were procedural and administrative changes in the institutions governing the nuclear energy policy. On the other hand, they were only minor modifications that did not question the fundamental tenets of nuclear energy policy. They can therefore be considered as symbolic concessions made by the political authorities in an attempt to appease antinuclear protest and to control the movement without being forced to make substantive concessions. The fact that such substantive gains were eventually obtained by the movement stems from other reasons, in particular from the presence of direct democracy instruments in Switzerland combined with raising antinuclear concerns in the public opinion largely resulting from the Chernobyl accident.

**Antinuclear opposition in the United States and Italy**

The example of Switzerland gives us some elements which tend to confirm our argument that social movement sometimes contribute to institutional reform, but without directly aiming at changing the institutions and having only a minor impact thereon. Our argument would be strengthened should we find similar dynamics in other situations. Therefore, next we briefly
discuss antinuclear mobilization in the United States and Italy, focusing on its institutional impact.

As in the Swiss case, antinuclear opposition in the US and Italy was latent in the first years of the nuclear energy policy. Only at the beginning of the sixties in the US and at the end of that decade in Italy, legal and institutional actions started to challenge the respective governments as regards the civilian use of nuclear power. Much like in Switzerland, the second half of the seventies was characterized by strong antinuclear mobilization - more in the US than in Italy - and by a shift from conventional to direct action. At the beginning of the eighties, the antinuclear movement in all three countries has left the public scene to the peace movement. In Italy and Switzerland the period of demobilization was set to an end by the Chernobyl accident, which not only gave a new impetus to protest against nuclear energy, but also influenced public opinion and modified party attitudes towards this issue. Finally, after this temporary remobilizing phase, antinuclear protest decreased again, although conventional forms of action would continue. More importantly for our purpose, antinuclear movements in all three countries have followed a similar trajectory and have contributed to the establishment of institutional reforms which they did not directly address. Let us have a closer look to how this could happen in the US and in Italy.

The unintended impact of the antinuclear movement is even clearer in the case of the US than in that of Switzerland. A series of changes which occurred in the American nuclear energy regulation during the seventies were indirectly caused by an expanding antinuclear movement (Jasper 1990: 124-127). While it is not obvious that all these changes are institutional reforms - even according to the broad definition we are adopting here -, the most important of them certainly deals with the specific institutions regarding the nuclear energy
policy. We are referring to the separation of the regulation of nuclear energy from its promotion, two tasks which, until then, were carried by a single governmental agency, namely the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). In 1974, following the Energy Reorganization Act, two new agencies were created; the promotion of nuclear energy was entrusted to the Energy Research and Development Agency (ERDA), while the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) became in charge of its regulation.

A second important reform pointing to a decentralization of the decisional structure in State agencies dealing with nuclear energy took place between 1975 and 1976, when the Congress reduced the powers of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy (JCAE), which was dismantled in 1977 to be replaced by eight parliamentary commissions. Moreover, several changes have occurred in the form of formal concessions to the antinuclear movement in thermal pollution and plant security matters. In this respect, the NRC - and before it the AEC - has progressively tightened the construction standards for nuclear plants during the seventies and eighties. The licensing procedure was also modified between 1970 and 1975, and public access to the regulatory process became more open in due course of the seventies. The progressive decentralization of the American nuclear energy policy continued in the eighties. In fact, state legislation and Public Utility Commissions took away power from the federal government in nuclear energy matters already starting from the end of the seventies. As a result, during the eighties the control by states has never stopped increasing as compared to the control by the federal administration.

All these institutional reforms on the procedural and administrative level, as well as others which took place during the first half of the seventies, were made with the aim of strengthening the nuclear energy policy and of accelerating its expansion (Jasper 1990: 56).
They were made at a time when major delays in plant construction and the resulting increasing costs, which skyrocketed after the oil crisis, began to become heavy. More importantly, these reforms were made when the antinuclear movement was becoming strong and its mobilization was increasing, not only locally but also nationally, and when antinuclear opposition was becoming heard both outside and inside the Congress. Although the peak of mobilization was reached only in 1976 and 1977, when the Seabrook and Diablo Canyon plants became the target of a series of direct actions by activists, the relentless pressure exerted by the movement was seen as a threat to the expansion of nuclear energy. As a consequence, in order to get along with their plans, regulators had to adapt to the new conditions created by the movement. They thought that by decentralizing the process and by giving more autonomy to regulatory agencies they would have been able to reach their objectives. That this strategy was eventually to fail is not important to our purpose. What is more important is that the antinuclear movement has contributed, at least in part, to these institutional changes and that it has had an indirect impact on institutions by demanding substantive changes in policy-related matters.

A similar process occurred in Italy. Antinuclear opposition - which shifted from a soft critique within the parliamentary and the lobbying arena to a real extraparliamentary opposition only after the 1973 oil crisis - created concern within the Ente Nazionale Energia Elettrica (ENEL) and forced the government to introduce new regulations concerning the construction of nuclear power plants and aimed at overstepping local opposition. As Diani (1994: 206) has put forward, « the growing obstacles faced by the ENEL in building new plants pressed the government to change the rules of the game in 1975 ». These procedural and administrative institutional changes, described by Public Law 393, can be summarized in three points: to keep the constraints over the use of money given by the government to local
municipalities which would be ready to host an electric plant; to reduce the power of local and regional authorities in the matter of communal planning and environmental protection; and to centralize the zoning procedures, which fall under the control of the industry department.

As in the US, institutional changes related to nuclear energy policy and, more generally, to energy policy occurred before the peak of antinuclear mobilization, which in Italy took place in 1977 with the intensification of protest against the plant in Montalto di Castro and in 1986 following the Chernobyl accident. Yet this does not imply a rejection of our argument. While it is true that reforms took place before the heyday of the antinuclear movement, it is also true that they were preceded by a phase of increasing antinuclear protest, as well as by the beginning of the expansion of the antinuclear issue in the public arena and its nationalization. Italian political authorities responded to the emerging threat by modifying the rules governing the nuclear energy policy. Furthermore, some procedural and administrative changes took place after the massive mobilization by the antinuclear movement. For example, with Public Law 8 of 1983, the government modified the procedures for the zoning plans by introducing more flexible regulations for the use of public money given to local councils as a compensation for the risks of hosting a nuclear plant. Thus, we have indications that, also in Italy, the antinuclear movement, while it has aimed mostly at forcing the authorities to stop or scale down the production of nuclear energy, has at the same time provoked institutional changes, although not very profound ones, and that this process is a result of the interaction between challengers and authorities who have tried to adapt to the new conditions created under the movement's pressure.
The institutional impact of the antinuclear movement

In all three countries under study the antinuclear movement has been to some extent successful in challenging nuclear energy. Its varying degree of success depends on a number of internal and external factors. State capacities in implementing a strong nuclear energy policy is certainly one of the major factors in this respect. What is more important for our argument is that, in all three countries, the movement had an impact not only thanks to institutions but also on institutions. However, such impact was not so much the product of a deliberate choice on the part of antinuclear opponents, but rather a by-product of their action aimed at challenging nuclear energy policy. In addition, such unintended consequence of the movement’s action has concerned only certain aspects of institutions. Specifically, it was always a matter of administrative reorganization in the particular policy area targeted by the movement, namely in the structures of nuclear energy policy. This certainly holds, for example, for the 1978 partial revision in Switzerland, the 1974 decentralization in the US, and the 1975 changes in Italy.

These changes were introduced around the mid-seventies, when the antinuclear movement started to mobilize on a large scale. At that time, antinuclear opposition shifted from conventional strategies to massive protest. This encourage us to think that institutional changes related to nuclear energy were tactical changes by the political authorities in an attempt to appease and control the protest. Far from dealing with the core institutional arrangements of the three countries and from reverting the rules of the game in a fundamental manner, these procedural and administrative reforms in the organizational and regulation of the nuclear energy policy did not threaten the existence or legitimacy of political authorities. These changes, however, allow the authorities to control popular protest by working on the
structures which can open access channels to social movements and regulate specific policy areas. The authorities make use of such institutional changes to appease the protest, in a way similar to the tactical adaptation underscored by McAdam (1983) or the symbolic concessions stressed, among others, by Piven and Cloward (1993). This, at least, is what comes out of our discussion of the antinuclear movement, which do not seek directly and explicitly to change the institutions, but has nevertheless an impact thereon in certain circumstances and to some extent. At this point, an obvious question should be raised: What happens with social movements which do target institutions with the aim of changing them? Let us address this question through the example of the women’s movement.

**Institutional change and by-product: the women’s movement**

Generally speaking, women’s’ movements of the seventies and the eighties had two main goals. First, they challenged existing policies regarding the role and condition of women in western society. Second, they targeted the institutions by demanding constitutional changes in order to extend the fundamental rights to women. The institutional impact resulting from their mobilization has been three-fold: to establish the women’s suffrage, to introduce the principle of equality between men and women in western Constitutions, and to create public structures in charge of putting into effect the equality principle in every domain. As we will try to illustrate with the example of Switzerland, the first two institutional reforms are a result of women’s movement challenges directly asking for them, while the third change is a by-product of the movement’s mobilization related to specific policies.
The political and social rights

In Switzerland, the early women’s movement activists asked for changes in two related domains - education and political rights -, but they soon focused on obtaining political citizenship for women (Woodtli 1977). Their strategy was to first gain political rights in order to be able, in a second step, to fight as equals with men to abolish social discriminations, that is to say to introduce the principle of equality between men and women. Until World War One, the movement was quite weak and fragmented. Furthermore, it lacked the support of political allies and the public opinion was quite unfavorable to its goals. In spite of its weaknesses, the movement succeeded in putting the issue of political rights in the public arena.

The period between World War One and World War Two was characterized in Switzerland by the latency of the women’s movement. Mobilization on the political rights issue resumed in the fifties. The movement became stronger organizationally and built political alliances, in particular with the Socialist party. One of the party’s national councilors presented a postulate in 1944 inviting the government to introduce the women’s suffrage in the Constitution. The movement pressed the government strongly in order to support this demand. This pressure had an effect in 1951, when the government asked the parliament to introduce the women’s suffrage. The proposal was refused by one of the two chambers, but a second proposal was eventually accepted in 1958. Since the Swiss Constitution provides for the mandatory referendum for any constitutional changes, the proposal had to go through a popular vote. The outcome of the poll was extremely unfavorable to the movement, for the proposal was refused by Swiss voters, showing that public opinion was still largely unfavorable to granting political rights to women.
This failure produced a radicalization of the movement. In addition, a new generation of activists joined the struggle, making the movement more politicized and contributing to the rise of a second wave of women’s movement mobilization (Lovendusky 1986; Randall 1987). At the same time, changes in the external environment came to help the movement in achieving its goal: its allies became increasingly influential, the authorities became convinced of the need of modifying the Constitution, and the public opinion shifted to a more favorable position as regards political rights for women. All these factors, coupled with the relentless mobilization of the movement, led Swiss voters to accept in 1971 the introduction of women’s political rights in the Constitution.

After having obtained political rights, the Swiss women’s movement tackled a second institutional goal: social rights. The idea of promoting a popular initiative in order to introduce the principle of equality between men and women in the Constitution was brought up in 1972 and by 1975 it became the movement’s principal goal. An increasingly strong movement - especially after its 1971 victory -, with the help of its parliamentary allies and of a favorable public opinion, forced the government to create in 1976 the Commission for Women’s Matters. The creation of this extrataparlamentary commission opened up new political opportunities for the movement and became one of the targets of protest, in particular against a governmental counter-project to the initiative asking for the introduction of social rights for women. The initiative was eventually withdrawn after the parliament had accepted the governmental counter-project. Finally, in 1981 Swiss voters accepted the introduction of a new article in the Constitution which granted social rights to women.

Both in asking for political rights and in demanding social rights, the Swiss women’s movement has had an impact which had been purposely looked for. In other words, these
institutional changes have been directly and explicitly demanded by the movement. Such impact has been made possible by the conjunction of internal and external factors. The combination of the movement’s efforts to press the political authorities, of the support of powerful allies within the parliamentary arena, and of the favorable position of the public opinion as regards the issues at hand has eventually brought about institutional reforms wished by the women’s movement. In addition, international pressures due to the fact that Switzerland was one of the last countries to grant political rights to women have accelerated the outcome of at least the first of the two reforms. In any event, none of the two institutional changes fit our argument about the unintended nature of the institutional impact of social movements. This, however, does not contradict the argument, for we are not claiming that all institutional changes are to be seen as by-products of movement policy-related actions. Our idea is rather that this holds in certain occasions. How frequent such occasions do occur is a matter of what type of movement we are dealing with, going from “often” in the case of instrumental movements such as the antinuclear movement to “sometimes” in the case of identity-oriented movements such as the women’s movement. Yet this does not prevent us to find situations in which our argument apply even to the latter, as we try to show below.

*Putting into effect the equality principle*

Once the general principle of equality between men and women had been inscribed into the Constitution, a further step consisted of putting it into effect. During the eighties and nineties, the Swiss women’s movement have been mobilizing in order to press the government to enforce the principle of equality formally obtained in 1981. The movement’s demands thus shifted from the institutional change to policy-related matters, in particular as regards work,
education, and social policies, as well as other policy areas in which women are victims of discrimination, in order to obtain actual - not merely formal - social rights. The work policy has been the first area targeted by the movement in its effort to get the equality principle actually applied. Equal opportunities and wages, as well as privileges for pregnant working women, have been three major goals of the movement during this period. The movement was looking for a law-by-law revision. The government responded to its demands by creating a state agency in charge of dealing with women's matters. Thus, although the movement was asking for policy changes, political authorities have preferred to opt for an institutional change at the procedural and administrative level rather than directly making substantive concessions.

In 1981, right after the vote on social rights for women, a postulate by a socialist national councilor proposed the creation of an agency which would be in charge of putting into effect the equality principle in all areas of law. This idea was taken up again in 1985 by the Federal Commission for Women’s Matters and in 1986 by a national councilor’s motion. The women’s movement soon joined the effort to create the new agency. The Federal Bureau of Equality was eventually created in 1988 and began its work in 1989. It is in charge of overseeing the elimination of existing discriminations in the federal and cantonal legislation, of conducting surveys on existing inequalities, and to propose specific policies in order to promote equality where it is still lacking.

The women’s movement has not asked for this institutional change, at least at the beginning, but it wanted that the principle of equality be put into effect and, hence, that women’s social rights be actually granted. Therefore, the creation of the Federal Bureau of Equality is a by-product of the movement’s mobilization aimed at modifying policy. The movement has targeted certain laws which contained a discrimination of women, such as the
laws about work, illness insurance, and abortion. The State responded to the movement’s pressure targeting specific policies with a change in the administrative sphere. This formal concession by the political authorities had a double impact on the women’s movement. First, it appeased the protest taking place outside the conventional political arenas. Women’s claims had now an institutional channel to exploit. As a consequence, unconventional actions decreased. The movement institutionalized and turned even more than before towards lobbying activities. Second, most movement leaders have been co-opted by the new agency as defenders of the women’s cause. The opening up of a new access channel for the women’s movement has been a success, but it had a negative impact on its structures and the movement entered a phase of organizational destructuring.

Although the creation of the Federal Bureau of Equality has been a success for the women’s movement, for the State this institutional change was rather a minor one. First, the new agency was poor in resources. Therefore, its margin of maneuvering was quite narrow, which has prevented the equality principle to be put into effect to a larger extent. Second, this institutional reform did not hit the core of the State’s interests and did not threaten the existence or legitimacy of political authorities. It is a procedural and administrative reform that, moreover, can easily be revised and redefined by the authorities. With today’s financial crisis and the focus on balancing the budget, the Federal Bureau of Equality has recently been questioned. This attests to the fragility of this agency and the limited scope of the institutional change that brought it about. By creating it, the State has responded with a formal concession to the pressure exerted by the women’s movement in order to put into effect the equality principle, but without responding to the movement’s substantive goals.
Conclusion

Most social movements aim at producing changes in governmental policies. In trying to reach these substantive and policy-related goals, they are often at the center of a process of institutional change. In this case, when movements contribute to institutional reform, the latter can be seen as a by-product of their actions directed at modifying policy. In other words, the reform is not directly and explicitly included in the movements’ demands, but rather is a latent function of their manifest action. This was the argument which we have tried to illustrate with the example of the antinuclear movement in three countries. In addition, this example has suggested that, in this way, movements have only a minor impact on institutions, in the sense that they do not threaten the existence or legitimacy of political authorities. It is a matter of reforms at the procedural and administrative level of the State. We have proposed to interpret this type of institutional change as the outcome of an interactive dynamic between challengers who press the political authorities with the aim of producing changes in governmental policies - that is to say social movements - and the authorities who respond to the challenges by trying to maximize the ratio between the concessions they make to movements and their legitimacy or power.

Although we stressed the impact on institutions of movements which mobilize on policy-related matters, some contemporary movements target both the policy and the institutions. Their institutional aim, in particular, stems from the need to provoke constitutional changes in order to reach their substantive goals. Examples of this type of movements are the women’s movement, the Civil rights movement, as well as regionalist and nationalist movements. By targeting existing institutions, these movements do not completely follow the logic of the argument we have put forward in our discussion. For the institutional
impact of these movements is not a by-product of their policy-oriented actions. For example, the women’s movement in Switzerland wanted to change the institutions and its impact thereon has been facilitated by at least four factors: the intensity of protest, the support by powerful allies, an increasingly favorable public opinion, and the low degree of threat provoked by the protest on the legitimacy of political authorities. However, we have tried to show that certain institutional changes may be a by-product of social movement action even in the case of movements which target both the institutions and the policy.

In the end, although the institutional impact of social movements, for all the reasons we have discussed, is usually a minor one, it may have profound repercussions on the movements themselves. For procedural and administrative changes alter the structure of political opportunities, in particular the degree of access to the political system. Now, as we know, political opportunities play a critical role in the emergence, development, and consequences of social movements. Thus, we come full circle.
References


Notes:

1 We would like to thank Simon Hug and Pascal Sciarini for their comments on a previous draft of this article.

2 A shorter occupation had already taken place in Kaiseraugst in 1973. It was conceived as a test in view of a more important action that would have been necessary had the construction works begun.

3 The NRC has executive, judicial, and legislative powers.

4 The substantive goals of the Italian antinuclear movement were eventually reached in 1987, when Italy abandoned the nuclear option following the acceptance of a popular referendum launched by the Radical Party, a small but influential party of the New Left.

5 The same holds for the bureaux of equality which have been created in several cantons. Their budget is generally about 0.1% of the cantonal budget and they have limited competences. Therefore, they have a rather precarious status, as is attested by the recent suppression of the bureaux of equality in the cantons of Zug and Neuchâtel.
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