Putting Social Movements in Their Place

Explaining Opposition to Energy Projects in the United States, 2000–2005

The field of social movement studies has expanded dramatically throughout the past three decades. But as it has done so, its focus has become increasingly narrow and “movement-centric.” When combined with the tendency to select successful struggles for study, the conceptual and methodological conventions of the field conduce to a decidedly Ptolemaic view of social movements: one that exaggerates the frequency and causal significance of movements as a form of politics.

This book reports the results of a comparative study, not of movements, but of twenty communities earmarked for environmentally risky energy projects. In stark contrast to the central thrust of the social movement literature, the authors find that the overall level of emergent opposition to the projects has been very low, and they seek to explain that variation and the impact, if any, it had on the ultimate fate of the proposed projects.

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For my earliest mentors, Chick Perrow, Mayer Zald, and especially John McCarthy – Doug

For my husband, Julien Boudet, and my parents, Denise and Daniel Schaffer – Hilary
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Over the course of any long-term research project, one invariably collects a host of debts to various individuals who have made contributions to the project along the way. This is our chance to extend our heartfelt thanks to all of these folk. Our biggest debt is to the nearly 250 informants who took time to share their stories and versions of events in their communities with us. In a very real sense, their accounts constitute the empirical foundation upon which this book rests. It is a tribute to our subjects and the time and care they took with their stories that we have as much confidence in this foundation as we do.

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