



The Social Movements Reader

Cases and Concepts

Third Edition

Edited by Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper

WILEY Blackwell

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Part I

Introduction

1

Editors' Introduction

Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper

People have complained about the things they dislike throughout history. Sometimes they do more than complain; they band together with others to change things. In modern societies, more than ever before, people have organized themselves to pursue a dizzying array of goals. There are the strikes, pickets, and rallies of the labor movement, aimed at higher wages and union recognition, but also at political goals. In the early nineteenth century the Luddites broke into early British factories and smashed new “labor-saving” machines. There have been dozens of revolutions like those in France, Russia, China, Cuba, and Iran. The women’s movement has tried to change family life and gender relations as well as the economic opportunities of women. We have seen Earth Day and organizations like the Union of Concerned Scientists and the Natural Resources Defense Council. Animal rights activists have broken into labs and “liberated” experimental animals. There have been plenty of conservative and right-wing movements as well, from Americans opposed to immigrants in the 1840s to those who fought federally mandated busing in the 1970s to those who have bombed abortion clinics in more recent years.

Some of these movements have looked for opportunities to claim new rights, while others have responded to threats or violence. Some have sought political and economic emancipation and gains, while others have promoted (or fought) lifestyle choices they liked (or feared). Some have created formal organizations, others have relied on

informal networks, and still others have engaged in more spontaneous actions such as riots. Movements have regularly had to choose between violent and nonviolent activities, illegal and legal ones, disruption and persuasion, extremism and moderation, reform and revolution. *Social movements are conscious, concerted, and sustained efforts by ordinary people to change some aspect of their society by using extra-institutional means.* Movements are more conscious and organized than fads and fashions. They last longer than a single protest or riot. There is more to them than formal organizations, although such organizations usually play a part. They are composed mainly of ordinary people as opposed to economic elites, army officers, or politicians. They need not be explicitly political, but many are. They are protesting against something, either explicitly as in antiwar movements or implicitly as in the back-to-the-land movement which is disgusted with modern urban and suburban life.

Political or Social Protest

Protest refers to the act of challenging, resisting, or making demands upon authorities, powerholders, and/or cultural beliefs and practices by some individual or group.

Why study social movements? First, you might be interested in understanding them for their own sake, as a common and dramatic part of the world around you. You might simply wish to better understand protestors and their points of view, perhaps especially when they seem to want things that to you seem undesirable. Why do some people think animals have rights, or others that the United Nations is part of a sinister conspiracy? Understanding

social movements is a good way to comprehend the human condition and human diversity.

But there are other reasons for studying social movements, which are windows onto a number of aspects of social life. You might study social movements if you are interested in politics, as movements are a main source of political conflict and, sometimes, change. They are often the first to articulate *new* political issues and ideas, including new visions of a better world. As people become attuned to a social problem they want solved, they typically form some kind of movement to push for a solution. Established political parties and their leaders are rarely asking the most interesting questions, or raising new issues; bureaucracy sets in, and politicians spend their time in routine tasks. It is typically movements outside the political system that force insiders to recognize new fears and desires.

You might also study social movements because you are interested in human action more generally, or in social theory. Scholars of social movements ask why and how people do the things they do, especially *why* they do things *together*: this is also the question that drives sociology in general, especially social theory. Social movements raise the famous Hobbesian problem of social order: why do people cooperate with each other when they might get as many or more benefits by acting selfishly or alone? The study of social movements makes the question more manageable: if we can see why people will voluntarily cooperate in social movements, we can understand why they cooperate in general. Political action is a paradigm of social action that sheds light on action in other spheres of life. It gets to the heart of human motivation. For example, do people act to maximize their material interests? Do they act out rituals that express their beliefs about the world, or simply reaffirm their place in that world? What is the

balance between symbolic and “instrumental” (goal-oriented) action? Between selfish and altruistic action?

Social Movement

A social movement is a collective, organized, sustained, and noninstitutional challenge to authorities, powerholders, or cultural beliefs and practices. A **revolutionary movement** is a social movement that seeks, at minimum, to overthrow the government or state, and perhaps to change the economy and key institutions of the entire society.

You will also benefit from the study of social movements if you are interested in social change. This might be a theoretical interest in why change occurs, or it might be a practical interest in encouraging or preventing change. Social movements are certainly one central source of social transformation. Other sources include those formal organizations, especially corporations, that are out to make a profit: they invent new technologies that change our ways of working and interacting. Corporations are always finding new ways of extracting profits from workers, and inventing new products to market. These changes typically disrupt people’s ways of life: a new machine makes people work harder, or toxic wastes have to be disposed of near a school. People react to these changes, and resist them, by forming social movements.

But, while formal organizations are the main source of technical change, they are rarely a source of change in values or in social arrangements. Why? In modern societies with tightly knit political and economic systems, the big bureaucracies demand economic and political control; they prize stability. So they try to routinize everything in order to prevent the unexpected. They resist changes in property

relations, for example, which are one of the key components of capitalism.

So innovation in values and political beliefs often arises from the discussions and efforts of social movements. Why don't societies just endlessly reproduce themselves intact? It is often social movements that develop new ways of seeing society and new ways of directing it. They are a central part of what has been called "civil society" or the "public sphere," in which groups and individuals debate their own futures.

If you have a *practical* interest in spreading democracy or changing society, there are tricks to learn—techniques of organizing, mobilizing, and influencing the media. There have been a lot of social movements around for the last 40 years, and people in those movements have accumulated a lot of know-how about how to run movements. This is not the main focus of this reader, but we hope there are a few practical lessons to be learned from it.

Finally, you might want to study social movements if you have an interest in the moral basis of society. Social movements are a bit like art: they are efforts to express values and sensibilities that have not yet been well articulated, that journalists haven't yet written about, that lawmakers have not yet addressed. We all have moral sensibilities—including unspoken intuitions as well as articulated principles and rules—that guide our action, or at least make us uneasy when they are violated. Social movements are good ways to understand these moral sensibilities.

Social movements play a crucial role in contemporary societies. We learn about the world around us through them. They encourage us to figure out how we feel about government policies, social trends, and new technologies. In some cases, they even inspire the invention of new

technologies or new ways of using old technologies. Most of all, they are one means by which we work out our moral visions, transforming vague intuitions into principles and political demands.

Research on social movements has changed enormously over time. Until the 1960s, most scholars who studied social movements were frightened of them. They saw them as dangerous mobs who acted irrationally, as slaves to their emotions, blindly following demagogues who had sprung up in their midst. In the nineteenth century, the crowds that attracted the most attention were those that periodically appeared in the cities of Europe demanding better conditions for workers, the right to vote, and other rights that we now take for granted. Most elites, including university professors, had little sympathy for them. Crowds were thought to whip up emotions that made people do things they would not otherwise do, would not want to do, and should not do. They transformed people into unthinking automatons, according to scholars of the time. The last hurrah of this line of thinking was in the 1950s, as scholars analyzed the Nazis in the same way as they had crowds: as people who were fooled by their leaders, whom they followed blindly and stupidly. For more than 100 years, most scholars feared political action outside of normal institutionalized channels.

These attitudes changed in the 1960s when, for one of the first times in history, large numbers of privileged people (those in college and with college educations) had considerable sympathy for the efforts of those at the bottom of society to demand freedoms and material improvements. The civil rights movement was the main reason views changed, as Americans outside the South learned of the repressive conditions Southern blacks faced.

It was hard to dismiss civil rights demonstrators as misguided, immature, or irrational. As a result, scholars began to see aspects of social movements they had overlooked when they had used the lens of an angry mob. There were several conceptual changes or “turns” made in social movement theories.

First was an economic turn. In 1965 an economist named Mancur Olson wrote a book, *The Logic of Collective Action*, in which he asked when and why individuals would protest if they were purely rational, in the sense of carefully weighing the costs and benefits of their choices. Although Olson portrayed people as overly individualistic (caring only about the costs and benefits to themselves individually, not to broader groups), he at least recognized that rational people could engage in protest. Within a few years, John McCarthy and Mayer Zald worked out another economic vision of protest, taking formal organizations as the core of social movements and showing that these social movement organizations (SMOs, for short) act a lot like business firms: they try to accumulate resources, hire staff whose interests might diverge from constituents’, and “sell” their point of view to potential contributors. SMOs even compete against one another for contributions; together they add up to a *social movement industry*. Because of their emphasis on SMOs’ mobilization of time and money, they came to be known as resource mobilization theorists. Just as Olson saw individuals as rational, so McCarthy and Zald saw organizations as rational. Protestors were no longer dismissed as silly or dangerous.

Around the same time, scholars also discovered the explicitly political dimension of social movements. Most older social movements, like the labor or the civil rights movements, were making demands directly to elites or the state. Foremost were claims for new rights, especially voting rights but also the right to unionize in elections

recognized by the government. Thus the state was involved not only as the target but also as the adjudicator of grievances. In this view, which came to be known as *political process theory*, social movements were also seen as eminently rational; indeed, they were normal politics that used extra-institutional means. As in the economic models of mobilization theories, protestors were seen as normal people pursuing their interests as best they could. By highlighting social movements' interactions with the state, these process theories have focused on conflict and the external environments of social movements, to the extent that they even explain the emergence of social movements as resulting from "opportunities" provided by the state (such as a lessening of repression or a division between economic and political elites).

In the late 1980s, yet another dimension of social movements came to be appreciated: their cultural side. Whereas the economic and political turns had both featured protestors as straightforwardly rational and instrumental, scholars now saw the work that goes into creating symbols, convincing people that they have grievances, and establishing a feeling of solidarity among participants.

Two cultural components of movements have been studied more than others. One is the process by which organizers "frame" or publicly present their issues in a way that resonates with or makes sense to potential recruits and the broader public. The other is the *collective identity* that organizers can either use or create to arouse interest in and loyalty to their cause. Most fortunate are those activists who can politicize an existing identity, as when black college students in the South around 1960 began to feel as though it was up to them to lead the civil rights movement into a more militant phase. Other activists may try to create an identity based on membership in the

movement itself, as socialists have done since the nineteenth century.

Recently scholars have begun to recognize and study even more aspects of social movements. For example, many movements have a global reach, tying together protest groups across many countries or establishing international organizations. The environmental movement and the protest against the World Trade Organization and the unregulated globalization of trade are examples. Yet most of our models still assume a national movement interacting with a single national state.

The emotions of protest are also being rediscovered. A variety of complex emotions accompany all social life, but they are especially clear in social movements. Organizers must arouse anger and outrage and compassion, often by playing on fears and anxieties. Sometimes these fears and anxieties need to be mitigated before people will protest. Typically, organizers must also offer certain joys and excitements to participants in order to get them to remain in the movement. These represent some of the future directions that research on social movements seems likely to take in coming years.

Our understanding of social movements has grown as these movements themselves have changed. Like everyone else, scholars of social movements are influenced by what they see happening around them. Much protest of the nineteenth century took the form of urban riots, so it was natural to focus on the nature of the crowd. In the 1950s it was important to understand how the Nazis could have taken hold of an otherwise civilized nation, so “mass society” theories were developed to explain this. Scholars who have examined the labor movement and the American civil rights movement recognized that claims of new rights necessarily involve the state, so it was natural for them to

focus on the political dimensions of protest. Social scientists who came of age in the 1960s and after were often favorably disposed toward the social movements around them, and so portrayed protestors as reasonable people. Many of the movements that came after the 1960s were not about rights for oppressed groups, but about lifestyles and cultural meanings, so it was inevitable that scholars would sooner or later turn to this dimension of protest. Likewise, in recent years, several important social movements have become more global in scope. Many movements are also interested in changing our emotional cultures, especially movements influenced by the women's movement, which argued that women were disadvantaged by the ways in which different emotions were thought appropriate for men and for women.

Research on social movements will undoubtedly continue to evolve as social movements themselves evolve.

Scholars and activists themselves have asked a number of questions about social movements. We have grouped the readings in this volume around eight main questions. Foremost, of course, why do social movements occur, and why do they occur when they do? Who joins and supports them? What determines how long a person stays in a social movement: who stays and who drops out? Also, how are movements organized? And what do they do? In other words, how do they decide what tactics to deploy? How are movements shaped by their interactions with other institutions and groups? For example, how are they affected by the media? And by the state and elites? Why and how do they decline or end? Finally, what changes do movements bring about?

The pages that follow give a variety of answers to each of these questions. The readings gathered here, furthermore,