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THE ROLE OF DIFFUSION PROCESSES IN NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS:
SOME CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

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**THE ROLE OF DIFFUSION PROCESSES IN NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS:
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The role of diffusion processes in new social movements:
some conceptual clarifications¹

1. A mobilization model: the political process

Recently the so-called "political process approach" (Tilly 1978; McAdam 1982) has been receiving more and more attention in the literature on social movements and collective action. The idea, resulting from a functionalist approach to social movements, that social transformations yield strains and frustrations leading directly to collective action, is finding an increasing amount of theoretical challenges. Some mediating factors seem to intervene to modify the direct causal relationship stimuli-response typical of the classical paradigm. According to the political process approach, these factors relate to the political context of protest.

The concept of "political opportunity structure" (POS) (Eisinger 1973; Tarrow 1983; Kitschelt 1986; Kriesi 1991) is usually used to summarize the set of political factors altering the relationship between large-scale social

¹ I would like to thank Charles Tilly for his comments on an earlier version of this paper.

transformation and mobilization. Although differences exist between formulations of POS, we can see its central core in three sets of characteristics. First, an important part seems to be taken by some institutional features of the political context of mobilization². The distinction between open and closed states (Kriesi 1991) summarizes well this dimension. Thus, for instance, some direct democratic procedures like those existing in Switzerland create a formal openness leading to mobilization opportunities for social movements. Second, there are informal variables relating to the ways political authorities treat challenging groups. Here the opposition of exclusive and inclusive strategies³ (Kriesi 1991) is very useful. We know for instance that French authorities and those of Switzerland have two opposite ways of dealing with protest, the former being much more repressive than the latter. This seems indeed to have repercussions in the social movements' degree of radicalism. Third, many studies have shown how changes in the configuration of power may have a very important, sometimes drastic, impact on social movements mobilization (McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1989; Kriesi et al. 1992).

The concept of POS, in all these formulations, has been very useful from a theoretical point of view in explaining variations in new social movements' action and structure through different political contexts. Yet, unless we fall into a very undesirable reductionism in social sciences, we cannot deny the sometimes crucial role of other factors in the mobilization process. The POS-mobilization relationship is not as linear as some models could let us think. At least four elements contribute to relativize the importance of the

² The political context of mobilization can vary, but the national one is the most important (Tilly 1978; Kriesi 1991).

³ Exclusive strategies rely mainly on repression, whereas inclusive ones mean chiefly negotiation.

national POS upon new social movements action⁴. First, it has been emphasized that different types of movements have different relationships with the POS (Duyvendak 1990; Giugni and Kriesi 1990). For instance, a mainly confrontative movement like the urban autonomous movement usually respond in a radical manner to a repressive attitude by political authorities, whereas a more sub-cultural movement like the homosexual movement will more probably tend to withdraw into itself. Second, although the national POS is the most important for new social movements mobilization, sub-national and supra-national POS have to be taken into account as well. The former is very important for the Swiss case, because the mix of opportunities varies according to the canton. On the other hand, internationalization is nowadays a crucial issue in new social movements' policy. This level become increasingly important for them, as the world become more and more determined by international policies. This is particularly true for some movements, for example the solidarity movement, whose social movement organizations (SMOs) are often forced to orient themselves to supra-national authorities.

These two first elements relate to different relationships with expanding political opportunities. Two other factors also contribute to diminish the impact of the national POS upon new social movements. The first one consists in the existence of situations of exceptional "crisis", which lead to an instantaneous and spontaneous response by movements⁵. A well known example of such "suddenly imposed grievances" (Walsh 1981) is the strong mobilization that occurred after the nuclear accident of Tchernobyl. The second factor is the one I am interested in

⁴ These four factors have already been mentioned elsewhere (Kriesi 1991).

⁵ Of course the strength of this response will vary according to the previous organizational degree of social movements in a given country.

here: diffusion. Diffusion processes, particularly at the international level, occur very often in social movements' policy and are increasing in importance. Yet I think it is necessary to put some order, trying to better define what I mean by this term, borrowed like many other in the social sciences from the natural sciences.

2. Modes of diffusion

According to the Encyclopedia Universalis, "there surely exists a sociological sense of the term «diffusion» which relates only to the propagation of ideas, directly from mouth to ear (rumor), or indirectly, through books and propaganda means called audio-visual. It is here a narrow sense, that will not be considered here. In another sense, the one given to it by cultural anthropology, it relates to the propagation of cultural traits, spiritual (social institutions, myths or rites, etc.) and material (types of ceramics, agricultural techniques, etc.) as well, from the society where they appeared to culturally different societies"⁶.

Students like Rogers in the former case (diffusion theory⁷), or Boas, Sapir and Kroeber in the latter (diffusionism⁸), have contributed to the clarification of some diffusion mechanisms. But in this paper I am interested in a third type of diffusion: the one taking place inside the social movements sector, that is in non-conventional

⁶ Translated by the author.

⁷ In that sense the idea of diffusion is related to communication theories.

⁸ Diffusionism is opposed to both evolutionism and the ideas of cultural parallelism, in the sense that cultural similarities and recurrent facts would appear through borrowings between different societies and cultures.

political behavior⁹. I will concentrate on new social movements and the mechanisms of international diffusion of mobilization.

Generally speaking, I define diffusion of collective action as a process or, more precisely, a set of processes that, through a transfer of information from a mobilized group to an unmobilized one, extends mobilization and/or its forms from the former to the latter. This definition remains yet very vague and does not allow to distinguish between different mechanisms hiding behind it. I have purposely spoken of a set of processes, because I think different diffusion modes of protest must be divided. This is what I am going to do next. I will distinguish between four diffusion modes of protest: imitation, contagion, expansion and globalization. I will deal with them separately but in a succinct way. For my purpose is not to thoroughly study each mode, but rather to give an overview that can contribute to the clarification of this notion.

2.1. Imitation

A first way through which a social movement's action can influence¹⁰ the activity of another movement is by imitation. We have imitation when a challenging group borrows action forms from another group previously mobilized. It is a diffusion mode we should see as a tactical innovation mechanism and serving to enrich the action repertoire of a movement. The latter ascertain the existence and success of some action forms used by other

⁹ I define here social movements in this simple and pragmatic manner, in order to distinguish them from the two other arenas of interest intermediation, that is political parties and interest associations.

¹⁰ This term, here, does not imply any intentionality, but rather a link existing between two mobilizations.

challenging groups, and try to incorporate them into its own repertoire. This type of diffusion and its importance for the survival of social movements have already been underlined by others (McAdam 1983; Tilly 1984). Thanks to imitation, which has to be understood in this sense as a sort of learning process, a social movement incorporates in its repertoire strategies having shown their efficacy in other contexts and therefore able to increase its chances of success.

Of course the adoption of new action forms, that is tactical innovation, do not result only from imitation. There is also an endogenous innovation, although it varies according to the movements, some of them being precursors, some others simply imitating. Moreover the integration of new forms into the action repertoire relies upon a number of conditions. As has been remarked (Piven and Cloward 1977), people mobilize where they are and with the means at their disposal. Thus the labour movement has always used strike as an action form, because it was absolutely natural to do it. Yet it is clear that this strategy cannot be used indifferently by all social movements.

One of the most typical examples of imitation probably concerns the sit-in. This action form, consisting in a protest camp usually placed at the center of a conflict, has been, so to say, "invented" by the civil rights movement in the United States during the '50. Having turned out to be an effective tactic in the liberation struggle of the Black people there, the sit-in has consequently been adopted by other social movements and, particularly, by the students movement during the protest wave of '68. But the peace and the anti-nuclear movements have also been capable of learning from the experience of other people and have incorporated this form into their action repertoire.

Generally speaking, new social movements represent a protest area where the imitation process is particularly relevant. One of their characteristics is precisely to articulate many action forms from a very rich and varied repertoire. Therefore exchange of forms becomes quite intense and every movement can take advantage of the tactical creativity of other people. This exchange is moreover facilitated by the formal and informal links existing between them.

2.2. Contagion

The second diffusion mode of protest I would like to stress relates more to mobilization as such than the forms it takes. It has been underlined many times that the mobilization potential has in some way to be converted in actual challenge. This is what is meant by the formula of the passage from structure to action. For some students consensus mobilization done before and during social movements activity is crucial in this regard (Klandermans 1988). For some others, namely the advocates of resource mobilization approach, activity of SMOs constitute this conversion element (McCarthy and Zald 1977). For still some others, finally, a process of "cognitive liberation" must take place in order for the potential to transform itself into "kinesis" of protest (McAdam 1982). It remains to discover what yields this liberation effect. This could result from an excess of costs a movement must face without acting, that is an appreciable deterioration of its situation or of its perception of it; in other words a sort of saturation of its endurance. This factor certainly plays

a role, but a minor one within new social movements¹¹. Yet a crucial role is certainly played by the contagion process.

There is contagion when the mobilization of a movement and especially its success has a liberation effect upon another movement or upon the same movement in a different national context, so that the latter converses its potential into action. Of course it is always difficult to determine if there has been contagion or if the start of protest is due to other factors. Practically speaking, it is yet plausible that, if two mobilizations follow one another within a short lapse of time, the latter would have taken advantage from the former. This is especially true for the same movement in different countries.

Among new social movements we have a quite clear example of contagion. It is the case of the urban autonomous movement. A graphic is useful to show the succession of the mobilization of this movement in the three countries under consideration within a limited lapse of time. The start of protest in the Federal Republic of Germany occurred after it had reached its peak in Switzerland¹² and in the Netherlands. In this case a contagion effect is very likely. This is more likely to the extent that an explication in terms of coordination between the movements in the three countries is to be excluded, because the urban autonomous movement constitutes a local movement whose components are very isolated from one another, especially beyond national frontiers. A second example is given by the strong mobilization of the peace movement at the beginning of the 80's, when it protested against the NATO double decision to install cruise missiles in Europe. The protest first

¹¹ The characteristic of social movements as movements of "affluence" more than of "crisis" (Kerbo 1982) explains this fact, at least in part.

¹² In Switzerland the urban autonomous movement in Zurich has been an internal precursor and has yielded the largest amount of protest actions.

emerging in the countries directly concerned - above all the Federal Republic of Germany and the Netherlands - spread all over the continent to reach the countries that were not concerned by this decision. Finally, it is also likely that a contagion effect has played a role in the anti-nuclear protest during the second half of the 70's. In this case, the German movement, mobilized against the nuclear plant project in Wyhl could have contributed to the rise of the Swiss movement's protest, when it challenged the nuclear plant project in Kaiseraugst, a small village not far from Wyhl.

Graphic about here

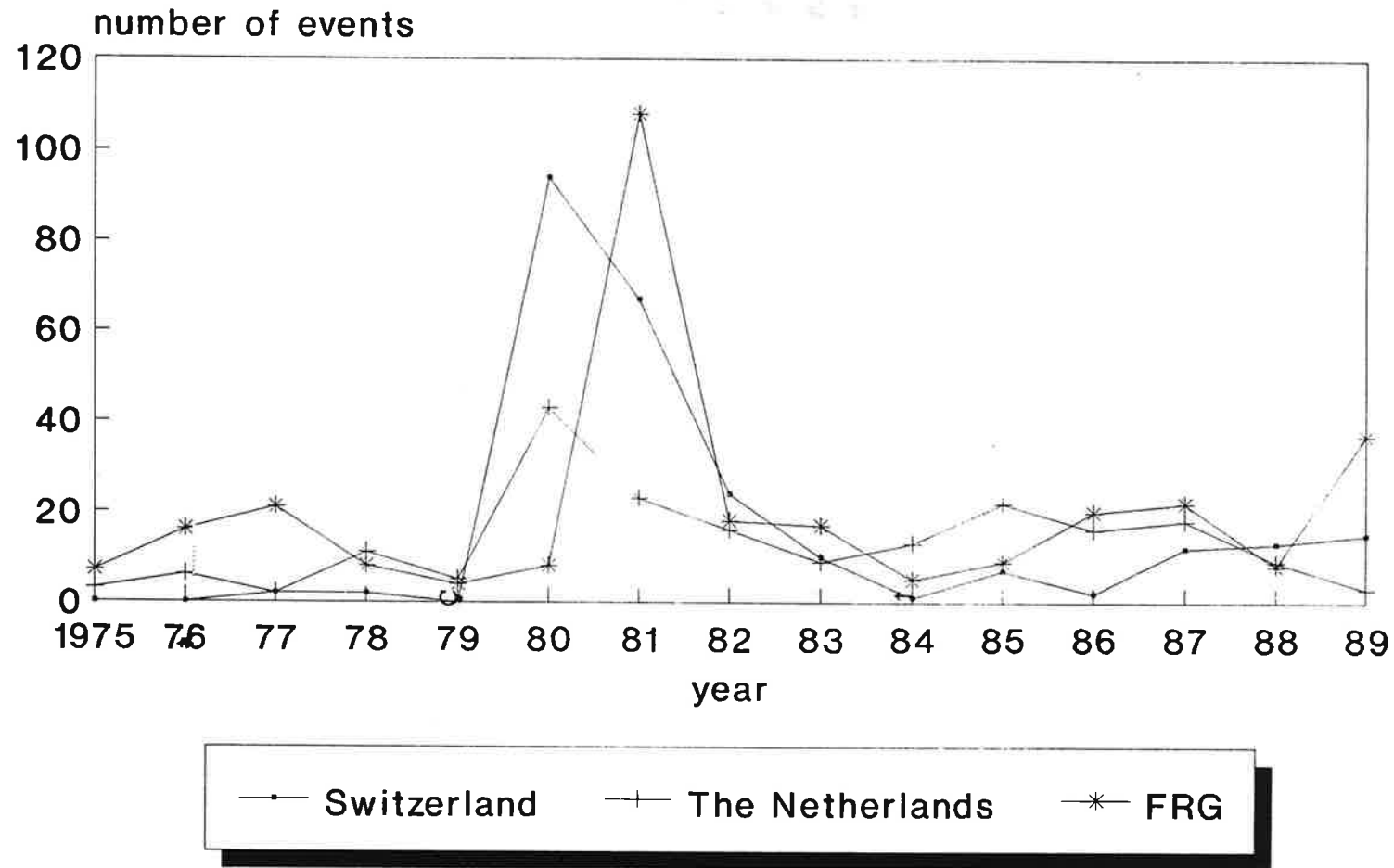
Of course to have contagion the minimal conditions of mobilization in the country where there is the, so to say, contaminated movement have to be fulfilled. A potential basis must therefore be present and the POS must be quite favorable to the movement.

2.3. Expansion

If the effect of contagion works primarily on the international level, another diffusion mode, which I will call expansion, works inside the national frontiers. It has been often remarked that new social movements yield a strong locally oriented challenge¹³. In many cases this mobilization diffuses and takes a larger scope, regional or even national. This can result from two factors. On one hand, the issue - the specific problem - may become more and more spread over the national territory. Thus participation, which was first spatially limited, extends and involves a larger portion of the country. This increased importance of

¹³ Actually this is only partially true. The development of new social movements has led to a larger scope.

Contagion in the urban autonomous movement



the issue is not solely geographical, but also political, that is concerned authorities are not only local any more, but also national.

On the other hand, success obtained by local mobilization may urge the movement to "aim further", widening the scope of its protest. In this second case some characteristics of the national POS can offer the means to accomplish this expansion of mobilization. This is the case, for instance, with the popular initiative in Switzerland. In this case a movement beginning its activity on the local level can consider extending it using this means, which can possibly compel authorities and population to handle the issue.

The expansion process has to be viewed in a resource mobilization perspective, in the sense that it results primarily from the work of network-building made by SMOs. It is actually possible that an issue extends in a more or less spontaneous way, but I think the work done by SMOs is the principal motive for the expansion of protest. The probability that a mobilization will widen can also increase if it has failed on the local level, since SMOs can then be called to widen the protest to other parts of the country. We can thus see that the relationship between the success of local protest and its expansion is far from simple and linear.

We could multiply the examples of this diffusion type. The ecology movement represents probably the best illustration of this process, particularly in Switzerland, where POS is favorable to this expansion of protest thanks above all to the presence of direct democratic procedures. It is in fact thanks to this means that local challenges against highways construction projects could become a

national issue, sometimes successfully¹⁴. The Swiss anti-nuclear movement followed a similar path towards nationalization through an expansion effect, but first without using direct democratic procedures.

2.4. Globalization¹⁵

The fourth and last mode of diffusion I would like to stress is what I call globalization. There is globalization when issues and action forms diffuse from one country to another, taking an international character. It is, I would say, an extension of the previous mode, but in this case mobilization goes beyond national frontiers to truly internationalize.

Like the previous one, this diffusion mode can be the result of the action of two factors. First, an issue or a theme may extend their scope beyond national frontiers. We should not confuse this type of internationalization with the simultaneous emergence of mobilizations in several countries. In this latter case we cannot speak of diffusion, because it is not a transfer of information from one country to another, but the reaction of social movements in different countries to the appearance of an international stimuli.

The second type of globalization - in my eyes more important - is lying on the power level. For some issues the most important decision-making centers may not lie on the national level, but rather on the international one. Then the social movements need to address their protest to this

¹⁴ On the impact of direct democratic procedures upon new social movements I can mention two opposite versions (Epple 1988; Giugni 1991).

¹⁵ I would like to thank Florence Passy for having helped me to clarify my ideas about this diffusion mode.

level. Openings of international POS can facilitate this diffusion of protest from the national to the international level. In fact it is above all thanks to this displacement of the power center that the globalization process can develop.

The solidarity movement illustrates in a clear manner this diffusion mode. The SMOs of this movement, after a period of mobilization on the national level, have noticed that the best way to articulate issues placed at the international level is to reach the directly concerned decision-making agencies. International lobbies have since then been created, in order to address protest where effects are more likely. Another example, outside new social movements, is constituted by the farmers movement. Whereas formerly its mobilization was addressed mainly to national authorities, nowadays there is an openness of international POS with the creation of decision-making centers at the European level, namely in Brussels, which has certainly contributed to the internationalization of the movement.

On the other hand, a clear and recent illustration of the first type of globalization - the one due to the widening of an issue - is shown by the various mobilizations in support of East European populations, when they tried, with success, to overthrow the communist regimes in place. An issue that at the beginning was specific to each of these countries became in the progress a global issue, although there have been different degrees of involvement and different motivations among the actors involved.

* * *

There should be no doubts about the fact that the four modes of diffusion we have just underlined are often combined; they then constitute ideal types, in a Weberian sense. New social movements, as much as the other

contemporary social movements, supply several examples of imitation, contagion, expansion and globalization, but isolating a process from the other is not always an easy exercise. For they often work together. This is attested by the example of the liberation movements in Eastern Europe, which I have mentioned to illustrate contagion and globalization as well. I have tried to point out what I think are the most important diffusion modes; it would now remain to study the mechanisms of their interactions, but this is not my purpose here.

3. Diffusion and contemporary social movements

As I have previously pointed out, several students - and I basically agree with them - indicate the nation¹⁶ as the main reference point of contemporary social movements¹⁷. Yet we live in an era where centripetal trends towards European unification are apparently being achieved. Nowadays, with the ongoing institutional consolidation of Europe, not without difficulties, the globalization process (in a more general sense, not in the narrower one I have used so far) at the world scale that began after World War II and has slowly followed its path until nowadays, is going through a fundamental phase of formal consolidation. After this stage the reference point represented by present European states seems to of diminishing importance. It is very likely that this will have important consequences upon

¹⁶ This term is to be understood in the sense of nation-state, as it has been shaped during the last two centuries.

¹⁷ This is confirmed by my own research. During the period from 1975 to 1989 new social movements have oriented their protest to the national level in the extent of 67 % in France and 52 % in the Netherland; in the Federal Republic of Germany the proportion drops to 39 %; Switzerland, finally, constitutes an exception, because only 30 % of the protest events I have counted are oriented to the federal level. In this latter case local protest is very important, because of the decentralised character of the country.

social movements and their strategies. The national frame could then look too narrow for social movements articulating issues naturally bound to go beyond this frame. This is namely the case of new social movements, and particularly of some of them. In fact movements such as the ecology, peace or solidarity movements - especially the latter - face issues which are international for definition. Since the openness of international POS is created it is easy to foresee that these movements will try to take advantage of this fact in order to address their protest on a wider level than the national one.

If processes of diffusion of protest have progressively increased their importance among contemporary social movements and are certainly going to continue in this direction, it is above all the mode I called globalization that will most relevant. In other words internationalization of social movements and, more particularly, of new social movements will be the principal issue social movements themselves, authorities concerned, researchers and society in general will be facing. Moreover we must take into account the openness created inside Eastern Europe. The loss of social control power by the former U.S.S.R. might certainly have contributed, if not provoked, the series of mobilizations that have led to the fall of communist regimes and to the open declaration of independence by several states and ethnic groups. Diffusion, in the form of its mode I have called contagion, cannot be neglected when we want to understand what happened in 1989¹⁸.

If internationalization constitutes the dominant diffusion process in the coming years, it is very likely that the other ones are also going to increase their

¹⁸ 1989 can be seen as the peak of this protest wave aiming at the liberation of East European peoples, but the previous years and the preceding ones must also come into an analysis of the situation, in order to understand its development.

importance. The principal carrier of the increasing importance of diffusion is without doubt the mass-media. As McLuhan (1964) has emphasized in his famous essay on media, we are fast approaching towards what he called the "global village". Transfer of information, which I have placed as a basic element of diffusion processes, is more and more frequent and dense. Thus this diffusion process is becoming more and more likely. Images of a social movement mobilizing in a country are immediately broadcast to the entire world and this can have consequences where the structural conditions for a homologous mobilization are present. This dynamic is important in the first place for new social movements, which aim to be global and universal in their intentions.

4. Conclusion

In this brief paper I have tried to clarify in a concise way a central concept for the study of social movements. I have distinguished four different modes of diffusion: imitation, contagion, expansion and globalization, which I think are the principal types involved in collective action. I think the distinction of these different diffusion types is important in understanding social movements's behavior. One among them has a particular relevance, especially in a future perspective: globalization or, as we could also say, internationalization. This is particularly important for new social movements and for diffusion in general. For it is inside this sector of non-conventional challenge that communication transfer between the different parts is present and strong.

I will conclude with two remarks concerning two major limits of this paper, which can be seen as possible future

investigations. First, even if I have tried to illustrate my purposes with some examples, it was in any case not my intention to empirically prove the existence of diffusion processes. Second, I would like to warn the reader upon the fact that I have not dealt with the problem of diffusion mechanisms explaining the transfer of information and of mobilization in the different modes I pointed out. This implies that I have not made a distinction between content and mechanisms of diffusion. We could distinguish between three objects of diffusion: a model of action, informations or beliefs about the likely effects of action, and action means. Mechanisms of diffusion could be the following: a direct communication between already existent collective actors, an indirect communication between already existent collective actors and an expansion through recruiting of new individual participants¹⁹.

¹⁹ This alternative way to deal with this topic has been suggested to me by Charles Tilly.

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