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Social Movements



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Definition

Social movements have become a constitutive part of contemporary societies, especially so in democratic contexts where the institutional conditions allow for movements to be formed and express themselves freely. They involve conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents, are linked by dense informal networks, share a distinct collective identity, and engage primarily – but not exclusively – in protest activities. Explanations of movement mobilization have typically stressed a number of key factors, or combinations thereof: in particular, grievances, mobilizing structures, political opportunities, and framing processes.

This chapter provides an overview of some key aspects relating to the study of social movements. Given the breath of this field, it can only be very selective in doing so. The chapter first addresses

the question of the definition of social movements. Then it moves on to looking at the ways in which they have been studied. Finally, it briefly discusses what movements leave behind them, that is, the issue of their outcomes and consequences. The chapter concludes with a summary of the most salient aspects addressed and some directions for future research.

Introduction

Social movements form a specific political arena in which citizens can make their voice heard and try to influence the power holders. They are a more direct channel of influence than the other two main existing channels – whose protagonists are, respectively, political parties and interest groups – as they follow a logic of participation rather than representation. In that sense, social movements have become a “normal” feature of contemporary democracies.

Labor movements were considered as the main driving force of industrial societies. They resulted from the process of industrialization and the rise of capitalism as new interests of the working class were created while the opposition between capital and labor emerged. Alongside with the weakening of the traditional cleavages, we have also come to see a strengthening of new cleavages during the twentieth century. A key transformation in this regard is the increasing salience of a new cleavage that gave rise to new social movements. In this

perspective, the traditional labor-capital struggle linked to trade unions and the workers' movement has become less prominent relative to "new" struggles in the postwar period. The fundamental break was understood in particular in terms of a changed focus from economic redistribution to quality of life and life-style concerns. Moreover, many of these aspects have been more recently integrated in the global justice and antiausterity movements, and the latter in particular are understood to have aimed to bring back the focus to redistribution. It could also be argued that character of protests has changed and that they have become more celebratory and ritualistic and less confrontational with new social movements. However, antiausterity protests may have brought back the more confrontational element with protests against perceived injustices in the current context of crisis.

This chapter provides an overview of some key aspects relating to the study of social movements. The chapter first addresses the question of the definition of social movements. Then it moves on to looking at the ways in which they have been studied. Finally, it briefly discusses what movements leave behind them, that is, the issue of their outcomes and consequences. The chapter concludes with a summary of the most salient aspects addressed and some directions for future research.

What Is a Social Movement?

As often happens, students of social movements do not always agree on the definition and delimitation of their object of study. Therefore, there are a variety of definitions of social movements. One of the founding fathers of the discipline defined them as "*a sustained challenge to powerholders in the name of a population living under the jurisdiction of those powerholders by means of repeated public displays of population's numbers, commitment, unity, and worthiness*" (Tilly, 1993, p. 7; italics in original). In a similar fashion, another leading scholar in the field – a close collaborator of Tilly – has defined them as "*collective challenges, based on common purposes and*

social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities" (Tarrow, 2011, p. 9; italics in original).

This way of defining and delimiting the object of study was reiterated in an important book that follows up from one of the big paradigm changes in the study of social movements, where the authors defined a movement as "a sustained campaign of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 11). The authors here stressed the fact that social movements are a distinctive – and historically specific – form of a broader category called contentious politics and analytically distinguish between four key aspects that movements combine: (1) sustained campaigns of claims making; (2) an array of public performance – the most typical being perhaps street demonstrations and strikes – (3) repeated displays of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment; and (4) organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities sustaining these activities. In a nutshell, they proposed to distinguish between social movement campaigns and social movement bases that sustain those campaigns.

Tilly's definition emphasizes the performative character of social movements: a set of public performances that have a contentious nature, that is, they impinge on the interests, rights, or identities of some other actor. It also stresses that social movements are historically specific phenomena – historically specific clusters of political performances (Tilly, 1993) – which emerged from the shift from an old to a new repertoire of contention between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries (see for example Tilly, Castañeda, & Wood, 2018).

Others, perhaps in a more operational perspective, have pointed to their relational nature. In this vein, Diani (1992) stressed that "[a] social movement is a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity" (Diani, 1992, p. 13). In this perspective, social movements involve conflictual relations

with clearly identified opponents, are linked by dense informal networks, share a distinct collective identity, and engage primarily – but not exclusively – in protest activities (della Porta & Diani, 2020). This definition clearly identifies four key features of social movements: informal networks, shared identities and solidarities, social conflict, and protest activities.

As we can see, the various existing definitions do not differ much as they include common aspects: actors, sustained action, and contention. Crucially, social movements do not equate with actors or organizations. They include various sorts of actions – informal networks, in the above definition – but they should not be reduced to them. An important distinction that needs to be made in this regard is that between social movements and social movement organizations (often designated with the acronym SMOs).

Political scientists have traditionally distinguished between three main arenas: the party or electoral arena, the intermediate arena of interest groups and associations – or lobbying arena, as it is often called in the Anglo-Saxon context – and the social movement arena. As these labels already suggest, each arena has their own protagonist organizations: respectively, political parties, interest groups or associations, and SMOs. The discipline itself has developed along these dividing lines, with both research and teaching being often confined within one or the other of these three categories and little communication between them.

To be sure, parties, interest groups, and social movement organizations often behave differently and within different arenas. They also have their specific features. For example, parties are vote-seeking and office-seeking and thus play the electoral game, whereas interest groups privilege more “hidden” lobbying activities and social movements, as already stressed, aim to exert influence “from outside” and often by gathering as many people as possible, or the “power of numbers,” as opposed to interest groups’ logic of influence or parties’ logic of representation. Yet, analysts are more and more inclined to believe that these three arenas are much less watertight than has often been thought. For example,

elections and protest activities are intimately linked to each other in various ways.

Given the focus of the present volume, an important question that arises when we think about social movements – and, more specifically SMOs – is how these compare to interest groups. While the difference with political parties seems quite straightforward and unambiguous given the basic electoral aims of the latter (but see for example Burstein 2014, who argues that interest organizations and political parties perform fairly similar tasks), that with interest groups or associations is fuzzier. Traditionally, social movements and interest groups have been considered as clearly separate phenomena: one referring to “outsiders” specializing on protest and adopting disruptive tactics, the other to “insiders” specializing on lobbying and using institutionalized tactics. Moreover, scholars in different research traditions may sometimes study the very same organizations but label them differently. Yet, such a neat separation might not be always warranted and the insider/outsider dichotomy is less clear-cut today than it might have been in the past.

Political scientists, therefore, sometimes prefer to use other labels, such as “advocacy organizations” or “interest organizations,” to designate a broader category that includes both SMOs and interest groups. This is predicated, among other things, on the idea that a key role of both types of organizations is to provide politicians with information about the policy demands of parts of the public (Burstein, 2014).

Students of social movements, on the other hand, often contest this view on at least three grounds. First, that social movements and interest groups, still, tend to act in different arenas most of the time. Second, that social movements are less interest-based, while interest groups are fully devoted to fulfill some collective interests. Third, and relatedly, that while identity plays a role in all sorts of organizations, it is particularly important for social movements. A way to get out of this dilemma lies perhaps in moving from an “essentialist” to a “situational” view of social and political actors: a given actor or organization can sometimes behave more as an outsider and following a social movement logic and sometimes

more as in insider and following an interest group logic. In other words, as Diani (2015) has stressed, social movements are not organizations of a different kind but reflect a different, network-based model of organizing, in which interest groups (and indeed political parties) may or may not be involved depending on specific conditions.

How Does a Social Movement Emerge?

There are at least two different, though not mutually exclusive, ways in which social movements are studied, which follows from the definitions discussed earlier. One way is to look at the dimensions of social movement analysis. Johnston (2014, p. 6) has nicely represented graphically how social scientists approach the study of social movements as the intersection of three circles representing three analytical spheres: the structural sphere, the ideational-interpretative sphere, and the performative sphere. While the researchers' focus might be – and often is – on one rather than the other of these three aspects – more on the social-structural bases of movements, on their ideational elements (identities, ideologies, frames), or on their activities, performances, and repertoires – a full-fledged analysis of social movements ought to deal with all three aspects at the same time.

Another way to deal with social movements is to look at the determinants and explanatory factors scholars have most often stressed. In this perspective, explanations of social movements – that is, of their emergence and levels of mobilization – have most often revolved around one or the other of four key sets of factors, or combinations thereof. The first, and most obvious, factor is the grievances that ultimately constitute the motives for forming a social movement and engaging in protest activities. This refers to the degree of discontent or dissatisfaction with the current situation or a policy proposal that may or may not give rise to a social movement, depending on the presence of the other factors listed below. It is the precondition for the emergence of social movements. It can be considered as the reason for complaint that individuals have and which,

under certain conditions, pushes them to collective action. This could be, for example, the decline in purchasing power, the feeling of being victim of an injustice or the lack of political representativeness, or the experience of illegitimate inequality. Early accounts in the collective behavior tradition and grievance theories – sometimes also called “breakdown theories” – have often stressed this kind of factors, sometimes with reference to the concept of frustration or relative deprivation (Buechler, 2004). They were then supplanted by explanations stressing internal movement resources and external political conditions, but regained somewhat popularity particularly in the aftermath of the economic crisis and the role of relative deprivation therein.

As mentioned, grievance and breakdown theories gave way to alternative explanations stressing other kinds of factors. A big paradigm shift in this regard occurred with the rise of resource mobilization theory from the early 1970s more or less. This approach placed resources and organization, rather than discontent and deprivation, at center stage. It has put forward the idea that social movements emerge thanks to preexisting mobilizing structures. These refer to the collective vehicles through which people mobilize and engage in collective action (McAdam et al., 1996). They include above all social networks and ties that support and facilitate mobilization. Thus, to mobilize effectively, a social movement must have a certain level of resources and organization. In other words, for mobilization to occur, there still needs to be the capacity of individuals to organize themselves and to mobilize resources that can support action.

As a natural development of resource mobilization theory, political opportunity theory – sometimes also called political process theory – has located social movements in their broader political and institutional context. This approach, which was dominant especially in the 1980s and 1990s, emphasized the role of political opportunities. These can be defined broadly as “*consistent but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national signals to social or political actors which either encourage or discourage them to use their internal resources to form social*

movements” (Tarrow, 1996, p. 54; emphasis in original). They refer to all those aspects of the political system that affect the possibilities that challenging groups have to mobilize effectively. The focus on political opportunities stresses a view according to which the likelihood that people form a social movement depend in important ways on certain features of their broader political and institutional environment.

While it looks both at static and more dynamic aspects, this approach is often defined in structural terms, which has led to criticism that it has a strong structural bias. As such, the key concept here is that of political opportunity structures. These refer to the features of a regime or its institutions that facilitate or hinder the collective action of certain political actors (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). Although, in the course of time, the concept of political opportunity structures has come to include a large variety of aspects, most often scholars have focused on one or more of the four following aspects: (1) the relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system; (2) the stability or instability of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity; (3) the presence or absence of elite allies; and (4) the state’s capacity and propensity for repression (McAdam, 1996, p. 27). Similarly, Tilly and Tarrow (2015) have stressed that political opportunity structures include the multiplicity of independent centers of power within it, its openness to new actors, the instability of current political alignments, the availability of influential allies or supporters for challengers, the extent to which the regime represses or facilitates collective claim making, and changes in any of the above. All these aspects of political opportunity structures are expected to influence the strategic choices made by movements as well as their impact. This lends itself for cross-national comparative analyses that examine how different national opportunity structures lead to differences in social movement mobilization.

Another “turn” occurred when scholars brought back culture into the explanations of social movements emergence and mobilization: the so-called “cultural turn.” While cultural analysis of social movements has always existed, this

turn came in part also as a reaction of the hegemonic role played by structural factors as stressed by resource mobilization and political opportunity theories. Generally speaking, this led scholars to pay more attention to the cultural context of social movements. It involved above all a closer attention paid to the role of collective identity for social movement emergence and mobilization as well as what has come to be known as framing theory, or cultural framing theory.

The framing perspective (see also chapter on ► [Interests Groups Framing](#)) stresses the fact that collective action depends on the social construction of problems and on interpretations of reality. In this view, framing processes refer to collective processes of interpretation, attribution, and social construction, and collective action frames are a set of action-oriented beliefs and representations that inspire and legitimize the campaigns of social movement organizations. They serve as levers to identify responsible actors – such as the government – for a given problem of undesired situations, possible solutions, and to motivate the people to mobilize (Benford & Snow, 2000). They can also help defining a problem as unjust, instilling people with the idea that something can be done, and lead to the formation and strengthening of collective identity need for political mobilization (Gamson, 1992). In other words, for it to mobilize, a critical mass of people must have socially constructed a common representation of the situation as unjust and immoral and not simply as unhappy or tolerable. The media obviously play an important role in this context. Furthermore, while the cultural turn in social movement studies came earlier, the recent emphasis on the role of emotions can also be subsumed under this shift of attention towards the cultural dimension of movements.

The foregoing reflects what McAdam et al. (2001, p. 17) have called “the classic social movement agenda for explaining contentious politics.” Grievances in that scheme are not explicitly there, but they can be subsumed under social change, whereby the latter implies the creation of different sorts of grievances. At the turn of last century, however, the very same authors proposed a major shift in the way social movements should

be studied (McAdam et al., 2001; see further Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). In broad strokes, this paradigm change involved at least two key aspects for the study of social movements. First, social movements are a specific form of contentious politics. Second, the analysis of contentious politics – and, more specifically, social movements – should not be limited to the conditions favoring their emergence, but ought to focus on episodes, mechanisms and processes as well as their combination.

More recently, scholarship has timidly tried to bring capitalism and the economy back into the study of social movements. In particular, under the thrust of the economic crisis of the late 2000s and early 2010s and of ever-growing inequality across the globe, some analysts have suggested more attention should be paid to economic factors in the explanation of the rise and mobilization of social movements (della Porta, 2015).

Inspired in particular by resource mobilization theory – which, in turn, was much influenced by organizational theory – a good deal of works have focused on SMOs, their features, internal structuring and dynamics, and development over time. In this regard, Kriesi (1996) has suggested that four aspects must be considered in the analysis of organizations' development: organizational growth and decline, internal structuring, external structuring, as well as goal orientations and action repertoires.

Concerning more specifically the transformation of SMOs' goal orientations and action repertoires, he proposed a relevant typology combining two criteria: whether the organization has a constituency or client orientation and whether there is a direct participation of the organization's constituency or lack thereof (Kriesi, 1996, p. 157). This yields four possible trajectories, starting from the typical position of SMOs, which is to be mainly oriented towards the authorities and foresee the direct participation of its constituency: institutionalization, involution, commercialization, and radicalization. Each of these trajectories has been the object of research, but especially so the path towards institutionalization (often from a political opportunity and institutional channeling perspective) and that towards radicalization (often in relation to the repression-radicalization nexus).

What Does a Social Movement Leave Behind It?

In addition to the question of movement emergence and development over time – in other words, the social movement campaigns – and to the question of who take part in movements – in other words, the social movement bases – research has increasingly become interested in their outcomes and consequences. A long-neglected aspect, in the past two decades we have seen a rapid growth in research on the effects of social movements. In this regard, reviews often distinguish between three main types of consequences: political, biographical, and cultural (Giugni, 2008).

Political consequences are those effects of movement activities that alter in some way the movements' political environment. This may include acquiring political legitimacy and access, influencing the governmental agenda or policy decisions and legislation (often called policy impact, including their implementation), or even altering the structural conditions in which movements operate (e.g., leading to the fall of a government). It is hard to summarize in a few lines this growing literature, but views have ranged from those of scholars pointing to the difficulty for social movements to impinge on public policy and others who have stressed that, under certain conditions, they are often successful in their efforts. Moreover, movements clearly have more leverage to influence the first stages of the policy process (e.g., setting an issue on the political agenda) than later stages (e.g., policy implementation). Among the factors and conditions that may lead to policy outcomes, one can mention certain movement tactics – whether aimed at disrupting, seen by some as the most successful tactic, negotiating, persuading, or through other mechanisms – favorable political opportunities (e.g., having a powerful allies within the institutional arenas) and a favorable public opinion.

Personal and biographical consequences of social movements are effects on the life-course of individuals who have participated in movement activities, effects that are at least in part due to involvement in those activities. Initially, most

research has focused on the long-term personal consequences of New Left activism in the USA in the late 1960s. This body of literature is easier to sum up as findings are more consistent between the various studies. In broad strokes, these follow-up studies of New Left activists provided consistent evidence that prior involvement in social movements and protest activities has a powerful and enduring impact of participation in movement activities on the biographies of participants, both on their political and personal lives. In other words, political attitudes and behaviors as much as individual life-course choices are strongly influenced by previous participation in movement activities, also years or even decades later. More recent work has tried to go beyond this focus on New Left activists and on highly committed activism by studying the biographical effects of other kinds of movement participants – including right-wing activists – or more “routine,” run-of-the-mill movement participants. These works largely confirm the important biographical impact of people’s involvement in social movements.

Cultural consequences refer to how social movements may alter their broader cultural environment. It is fair to say that this type of effects, at least directly, has been less studied than the previous types and above all than political and policy effects. More indirectly, however, there is a wealth of studies dealing with a variety of cultural impact of social movements. These may include effects on public opinion and everyday behavior; the media and popular culture; nonpolitical institutions such as science, medicine, and education; politics; as well as cultural outcomes such as performances, ideations, and artifacts or products. As we can see, the list is so broad and varied that any attempt to summarize the findings will be immensely challenging. However, one could argue that the deepest effects of social movements are likely to be those observed in the cultural realm. Perhaps even more that for other kinds of effects, the difficulty is not so much in saying that social movements inevitably always leave something behind them as it is to show how and under which conditions this occurs.

In addition to this traditional trilogy, two other types of movement consequences, much less

explored, deserve to be mentioned, if only briefly. The first is often referred to as economic outcomes. Research has focused on three main ways in which this may occur (King & Pearce, 2010): challenging corporations directly, creating transnational systems of private regulation, and creating market alternatives through institutional entrepreneurship. In other words, social movements may either intervene directly in markets or attempt indirectly to involve the state to attain more regulation.

A second, much overlooked kind of consequence of social movements is represented by –so-called “spillover effects,” referring to the ways in which movements may influence each other. Here, however, we get closer to the study of diffusion of social movements, which opens up an entire subfield of study in need of further developments.

Conclusion

Social movements are an integral part of contemporary democracies. It was not always like this. In his historical analysis of the transformation of the repertoires of contention, Tilly showed how the modern social movements are historically situated, emerging from a major shift in the action repertoires at ordinary people’s disposal between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. That is when the social movement was invented (Tilly, 1993; see further Tilly et al., 2018), under the push of two large-scale processes: capitalism and state formation. Since then, social movement has become a constitutive feature of society, allowing ordinary people who have not necessarily access to the institutionalized political arenas to make their claims directly rather than through the representative system.

Mirroring such an importance of their object of study, scholars have paid increasing attention to social movements, in particular since the 1960, describing them in detail and trying to explain their emergence and activities as well as their consequences of all sorts. Explanations have typically stressed a number of key factors, or combinations thereof: in particular, grievances,

mobilizing structures, political opportunities, framing processes. Just like the movements, such explanations have also evolved over time, some factors prevailing over others at different epochs. Thus, grievance-based accounts have progressively made room for theories stressing structural factors such as mobilizing structures and political opportunity structures, and then more cultural-based account has also made a breakthrough. Furthermore, the stress on the – structural or cultural – conditions for the emergence of social movements and protest activities has also been complemented with a focus on episodes, mechanisms, and processes. More recently, economic factors have received more attention, especially in the aftermath of the economic crisis of the late 200 s and early 2010s.

Despite the rapid growth in the number of scholars and research carried out in the field of social movements studies, there is still much to do in order to reach a better knowledge of how movements emerge, how they organize and mobilize, and what they leave behind them. This is also a result of the fact that the movements themselves are a moving target. In other words, social movements and protest activities are constantly changing, especially under the thrust of what has become to be known as globalization and all that this implies in terms of acceleration of social networking across the globe, the shift in the scale of protest, a rise of digital means of communication and mobilization, and so forth. All this has led – and will most likely continue to lead – to a number of changes in the features of protest politics. Some of these changes include not only an increasing “normalization” of protest – and, therefore, of social movements – but also to a “pluralization” of participants in social movement activism, the blending of economic and cultural issues in protest, and an increasing overlap of conventional and unconventional politics (Giugni & Grasso, 2019). As such, we can see that while the character of protest and participation has changed, social movements remain a fundamental component of democratic life.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Citizen Groups and Participation](#)
- ▶ [Outside Lobbying/Outsider Strategies](#)
- ▶ [Public Interest Groups](#)

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