Module 6 Social Protests and Social Movements

Lecture 29
Social Protests and Social Movements: An Overview

By social protest we mean the performances that have an explicit social purpose, that direct their audience to social action. We assume that social protest performances emerge solely from marginalized peoples and oppositional struggles. Social protest performances function as counter hegemonic strategic through which underrepresented groups challenge the dominant social order and agitate for change. The representational apparatus of the social protest performance serves to reinforce, re-imagine and rearticulate the objectives of social and political resistance. I use the term social protest performance to indicate that these performances actively protest against very specific and urgent causes of social need. Social protest performance is an ever-evolving genre appearing wherever oppressed people assert their subjectivity and contest the status quo.

On occasion, of course, everybody resistance turns into open revolt or into some other form of ‘social movement’. This term came into use among sociologists and political scientists in the United States in the 1950s, and has remained popular ever since (Tilly 1978; Tarrow 1994; Melucci 19996). A possible weakness in primitive Rebels is its broad use of the term to include anything from a riot lasting only a few hours to Permanent organization, from the carbonari to the mafia. On the other hand, the value of Hobsbawm’s study and of the term ‘social movement’ more generally, is to direct attention to characteristics which are shared by religion and political movements, previously studied in isolation from each other. Some of these movements may be described as ‘activeve’, taking the initiative in the pursuit of precise aim such as national independence, the abolition of slavery or votes for women.

We must also analyze three critical questions about social movements:

1. In the first place, who is moving? What kind of person leads, and what kind of person follows? Many movements, religious and political alike, have leaders of the kind that Max Weber defined as ‘charismatic’, from St Francis or Martin Luther to Napoleon or Lenin. Weber defined charisma as a quality by virtue of which an individual is treated as ‘endowed with supernatural, superhuman or at least specifically exceptional power or qualities’ (1920). Weber has been criticized for overemphasizing the qualities of the leader, rather than the expectation of the followers who ‘impute’ these qualities (Shils 1975:126-84; B. Anderson 199: 78-93). One might ask whether there are kinds of follower who are particularly susceptible to charismatic leaders, the young for example. The young are often prominent in social movements, perhaps because their capacity for spontaneous action has not yet been dulled by routine, and because they have been to lose than their elders in the event of failure and repression.

2. In the second place, what means are adopted to achieve the collective goals? A recurrent conflict within social movements is between participants who are prepared to use violence in pursuit of their goals and those, such as Gandhi in
the movement for Indian independence, who reject the use of force and attempt to find alternative, from peaceful demonstration to the boycott of foreign goods.

We may speak of the different movements. A recurrent element in peaceful movements is the signing of a petition and its presentation to the authorities. Another is the hunger strikes, use by the suffragettes and the IRA alike to demand the status of political prisons. Even riots, however spontaneous in origin, draw on repertories such as ritual which are familiar in a given culture, rituals which both legitimate popular actions by presenting it as a procession or pilgrimage and also make it more persuasive by giving it dramatic from. Alternatively, they refer back to other riots by adopting traditional symbols such as the hanging of unpopular figures in effigy or placing a loaf or a spear as a protest against the price of bread.

3. In the third place, what makes some social movement more successful than others? A useful concept coined by social theorists is that of the successful ‘mobilization’ of resources such as arms, money and, above all, people (Tilly 1978:69-84; Oberchall 1993; Melucci 1996: 289-312). One of the keys to mobilization is charismatic leadership, but another is the creation of organization. In the nineteenth century Ireland for instance, support for independence, or ‘Home Rule’, was mobilized by the creation of The Home Government Association, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, The Irish National League and even the Gaelic Athletic Association. Subscription from members not only helped to finance the movement, but also encouraged loyalty by the ‘investors’.

Social movements are essentially fluid and informal, characterized by what Victor Turner called ‘communitas’. As a result they cannot last very long in his form. Some of them wither away while others are transformed by their own success. Growth leads to the ‘routinization of ‘communitas’-as Turner adapting Weber’s ‘routinization of charisma, described it or more prosaically, to the development of permanent institution such as the Franciscan order, the Lutheran Church and the communist and the Communist Party. The ‘movement’ ceases to move (U. Turner 1969: Biff). Later, when successful organizations commission official histories of themselves, these histories generally give the impression that these bodies were consciously planned and institutionalized right from the start. It is prudent to be skeptical of such claims.

The Concept of Social Movements

Social movements are a distinct social process, consisting of the mechanisms through which actors engaged in collective action:

- are involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents;
- are linked by dense informal networks;
- share a distinct collective action.

Conflictual Collective Action: Social movement actors are engaged in political and/or cultural conflicts meant to promote or oppose social change. By conflict we mean an oppositional relationship between actors who seek control of the same stake-
be it political, economic or cultural power- and in the process make negative claims on each other- i.e., demands which, if realized, would damage the interests of the other actors (Tilly 1978; Touraine 1981: 80-4). Accordingly, addressing collective problems, producing public goods, or expressing support for some moral values or principles does not automatically correspond to social movement action; the latter requires the identification of targets for collective efforts, specifically articulated in social or political terms. In contrast, when collective action focuses exclusively on the behavior and/or the legitimacy of specific individuals, or blames problem on humankind as a whole, on natural disasters or divine will, then it is difficult to speak of social movement processes (Gamson 1992; Melucci 1996). For example, collective action on globalization issues is conflictual to the extent that organizations like the World Trade Organization or the International Monetary Fund are blamed not because of their officials’ misconduct or specific policy mistakes, but as representatives of distinct coalitions of interests.

**Dense Informal Networks:** Dense informal networks differentiate social movement processes from the innumerable instances in which collective action takes place and is coordinated mostly within the boundaries of specific organizations. A social movement process is in place to the extent that both individual and organized actors, while keeping their autonomy and independence, engage in sustained exchanges of resources in pursuit of common goals. The coordination of specific initiatives, the regulation of individual actors’ conduct, and the definition of strategies all depend on permanent negotiations between the individuals and organizations involved in collective action. No single organized actor, no matter how powerful, can claim to represent a movement as a whole. It follows that more opportunities arise for highly committed and/or skilled individuals to play an independent role in the political process than would be the case when action is concentrated within formal organizations.

**Collective Identity:** Social movements are not merely the sum of protest events on certain issues, or even of specific campaigns. On the contrary, a social movement process is in place only when collective identities develop, which go beyond specific events and initiatives. Collective identity is strongly associated with recognition and the creation of connectedness (Pizzorno 1996). It brings with it a sense of common purpose and shared commitment to a cause, which enables single activists and/or organizations to regard themselves as inextricably linked to other actors, not necessarily identical but surely compatible, in a broader collective mobilization (Touraine 1981). Within social movements, membership criteria are extremely unstable and ultimately dependent on mutual recognition between actors; the activity of boundary definition- i.e., of defining who is and who not part of the network- is indeed plays a central role in the emergence and shaping of collective action (Melucci 1996, ch.3). For example, recent research on environmentalism suggests that animal rights activism be more distinctive and less identified with environmentalism in Britain than in Italy: as a result, it makes much more sense to regard the two as involved in the same movement process in the latter than in the former (Rootes 2003; Diani &Forno 2003).
**Conflictual and Consensual Collective Action**

It is not rare to witness broad coalitions of charities and other voluntary associations mobilizing on solidarity issues, for example on social exclusion on domestic politics, or on development or human rights issues in an international perspective, and to refer to them as social movements. In many cases, however, they might be best characterized as “consensus movements.” In both social movement and consensus movement dynamics, actors share solidarity and an interpretation of the world, enabling them to link specific acts and events in a longer time perspective. However, in the latter, sustained collective action does not take a conflictual element. Collective goods are often produced through cooperative efforts that neither imply nor require the identification of specific adversaries, trying to reduce the assets and opportunities of one’s group or preventing chances to expand them. Prospected solutions do not imply redistribution of neither power nor alterations in social structure, but focus instead on service delivery, self-help, personal and community empowerment. Likewise, the practice and promotion of alternative lifestyles does not require the presence of opponents defined in social and political terms. Collective actors may fight ethereal adversaries, ranging from bad or conventional taste, in the case of artistic and style-oriented movements, to “the inner enemy” in the case of some religious movements, without necessarily blaming any social actors for the state of things they intend to modify. However, insisting on the presence of conflict as a distinctive trait of movement need not force social movement analysts away from the investigation of those instances of collective action where a conflict is difficult to identify, such as those oriented to personal change (e.g., the so-called “human potential movement,” or many countercultural, alternative lifestyle networks) and those focusing on the delivery of some kind of help or assistance to an aggrieved collectivity (e.g., the so-called “solidarity movement”: Giugni and Passy 2001).

**Social Movements, Events, and Coalitions**

We have a social movement dynamic going on when single episodes of collective action are perceived as components of a longer lasting action, rather than discrete events; and when those who are engaged in them feel linked by ties of solidarity and of ideal communion with protagonists of other analogous mobilizations. The course of movement for the control of toxic waste in the United States provides a good example of this dynamic. From a series of initiatives which developed from a local base and in relation to specific goals such as blocking the construction of waste disposal plants in particular areas, the movement gradually developed into a collective force with a national base, concerned with numerous aspects of the relationship between nature and society, and with a much more sophisticated cultural elaboration (Szasz 1994:69-99). Identity building also means that a sense of collective belonging can be maintained even after a specific initiative or a particular campaign has come to an end. The persistence of these feelings will have at least two important consequences. First, it will make the revival of mobilization in relation to the same goals easier, whenever favorable conditions recur. Movements often oscillate between brief phase of intense public activity and long “latent” periods (Melluci 1984b; Taylor 1989), in which self-reflection and cultural production prevail. Second, representations of the world and collective identities which developed in a certain can also facilitate, through a gradual transformation, the development of new movements and new solidarities. For example, the close relationship existing in several countries between
movements of the new left of the early 1970s and successive political ecology movements has been noted on a number of occasions (Dalton 1994; Diani 1995a; Duyvendak 1995). Coalition is an example of informal networks of collective action which illustrates why collective identity is a crucial feature of social movements. In coalition dynamics, collective actors are densely connected to each other in terms of alliances, and identify explicit opponents, but those links are not necessarily backed by strong identity links. The networks between actors mobilizing on a common goal take a purely contingent and instrumental nature. Resource mobilization and campaigning is then conducted mainly through exchanges and pooling of resources between distinct groups and organizations. The latter rather than the network are the main source of participants’ identities and loyalties. Actor’s instrumentally share resources in order to achieve specific goals, yet do not develop any particular sense of belonging and of a common future during the process.

Social Movements and Organizational Processes

Social movements, political parties, and interest groups are often compared with each other, on the assumption that they all embody different styles of political organization (for example, Wilson 1973). At times, they are identified with religious sects and cults (for example, Robbins 1988). However, the difference between social movements and these and other organizations does not consist primarily of differences in organizational characteristics, not even of a peculiar kind (Tilly 1988; Oliver 1898). They are networks which may either include formal organizations or not, depending on shifting circumstances. As a consequence, a single organization, whatever its dominant traits, is not a social movement. Of course it may be involved in a social movement process, but the two are not identical, as they reflect different identical principles.

But social movement may be used to mean both networks of interaction and specific organizations, for example, citizens’ rights groups like Common Cause, environmental organizations like the Sierra Club, or even religious sects like Nichiren SSOSHU (McAdam et al. 1988:695; see also Lofland 1996). Yet we should not uncritically apply to social movement analysis concepts borrowed from organizational theory: “all too often we speak of movement strategy, tactics, leadership, membership, recruitment, division of labor, success and failure- terms which strictly apply only to coherent decision making entities (that is, organizations or groups), not to crowds, collectivities, or whole social movements” (Oliver 1989: 4). The instability of the relationship between organizational and movement identities implies that movements are by definition fluid phenomena. In the formation and consolidation phases, a sense of collective belonging prevails on links of solidarity and loyalty which can exist between individuals and specific groups or associations. A movement tends to burn out when organizational identities come to dominate once more, or when “feeling part of it” refers primarily to one’s organization and its components, rather than to a broader collective with blurred boundaries (Diani 2003a). Individual participation is important for social movement and also it involves participants and not members. The participation of individual is not necessarily limited to single protest events and develop in public meetings, groups and committees. Alternatively one may support a movement by promoting its ideas and its point of view among institutions, other political actors, or the media. However, the existence of a range of possible ways of becoming involved means that the membership of movements can
never be reduced to a single act of adherence. It consists, rather, of a series of
differentiated acts, which taken together reinforce the feeling of belonging and
identity (Gusfield 1994:62). Social movements are analytically different from social
movement organization; any organization which is involved in a social movement
dynamic may be regarded as “social movement organization.”

Social Movements and Protest

Until the early 1970s debates on social movements emphasized their
noninstitutionalized nature (Alberoni 1984). Social movements may be distinguished
from other political actors because of their adoption of “unusual” patterns of political
behavior as political parties actually perform specific functions at level of interest
representation. Now, there are some objections to considering protest a core feature of
social movements. First, public protest plays only a marginal role in movements
concerned with personal and cultural change, in religious movements, and the like.
Cultural conflict and symbolic challenges often take forms, such as the practice of
specific lifestyles, the adoption of certain clothes or hair cut, the adoption of rituals
that can only be regarded as protest if we stretch the concept to a very considerable
degree (Snow 2005). Moreover even in the political realm it is increasingly debatable
whether protest can still be considered an “unconventional”, or even violent or
“confrontational,” activity. Various forms of political protest have increasingly
become part of the consolidated repertoire of collective action, at least in Western
democracies. In general, protest seems no longer restricted to radical sectors, but
rather an option, open to a much broader range of actors when they feel their relative
position in the political process to come under threat (e.g., Dalton 1996).

Protest differentiates social movements from other types of networks, like those
referred to as “epistemic communities” (Haas 1992; Keck and Sikkink 1998). These
communities are organized around networks of individuals and groups with specific
and/or managerial competences in distinct policy areas. Like social movements, their
members share a common frame of reference and take sides on conflictual issues. The
forms of structural ties and exchange of resources within that network are different
from those that tend to characterize social movements. Epistemic communities
involve actors usually endowed with decision making power whereas social
movement actors usually occupy a peripheral position in decision making power and
need to mobilize public opinion to maintain their pressure capacity. As the new wave
of global justice collective mobilization at the turn of century has confirmed, social
movement politics is still to a large extent “politics in the streets.” The use of protest
as a major source of pressure has relevant effects on the structure and strategy of
social movements.

Four Core Questions for Social Movement Analysis

Social movements may be approached in reference to very diverse intellectual
questions. The first set of questions refers to the relationship between structural
change and transformations in patterns of social conflict. Can we see social
movements as expressions of conflict? And what conflicts? Have there been changes
in the main conflicts addressed by social movements? And what conflicts? Another
set of question has to do with the role of cultural representations in social conflict.
How are social problems identified as potential objects of collective action? How do
certain social actors come to develop a sense of commonality and to identify with the same “collective we”? And how can specific protest events come to be perceived as part of the same conflict? Where do social movement cultures and values originate from? A third set of questions addresses the process through which values, interests, and ideas get turned into collective action. How does it become possible to mobilize and face the risks and costs of protest activity? What are the roles of identities and symbols, emotions and organizations, and networks, in explaining the start and persistence of collective action? What forms do organizations take in their attempts to maximize the strength of collective challenges and their outcomes? Finally, it has frequently been asked how a certain social, political, and/or cultural context affects social movements’ chances of success, and the forms they take. What does explain the varying intensity over time of collective violence and other types of public challenges against power holders? Do the traits of political systems and their attitudes towards citizens’ demands influence challengers’ impact in the political arena? How do protest tactics and strategies change over time, and why?

The 1960s were important because they saw not only an increase in new forms of political participation, but also a change in the main conflictual issues. Traditionally, social movements had focus mainly on issues of labor and nations: since the 1960s, “new social movements” have emerged instead centered on concerns such as women’s liberation, environmental protection, etc. These changes in the quantity and quality of protest prompted significant innovations in social scientists’ approach to those questions. Let us critically analyze those diverse intellectual questions to approach social movements.

Is social change creating the conditions for the emergence of new movements?

Scholars of new movements agreed that conflict among the industrial classes is of decreasing relevance, and similarly the representation of movements as largely homogeneous subjects is no longer feasible. According to Alain Touraine, “Social movements are not a marginal rejection of order, they are the central forces fighting one against the other to control the production of society by itself and the action of classes for the shaping of historicity (i.e., the overall system of meaning which sets dominant rules in a given society)” (Touraine 1981: 29). In the industrial society, the ruling class and the popular class oppose each other, as they did in the agrarian and the mercantile societies, and as they will do, according to Touraine, in the programmed society, where new classes will replace capitalists and the working class as the central actors of the conflict.

Another contribution to the definition of the characteristics of new movements in the programmed society came from Alberto Melucci (1982, 1989, 1996). He described contemporary societies as highly differentiated systems, which invest increasingly in the creation of individual autonomous centers of action, at the same time requiring closer integration and extending control over the motives for human action. In his view, new social movements try to oppose the intrusion of the state and the market into social life, reclaiming individuals’ right to define their identities and to determine their private and affective lives against the omnipresent and comprehensive manipulation of the system. Unlike the workers’ movement, new social movements do not, in Melucci’s view, limit themselves to seeking material gain, but challenge the diffuse notions of politics and of society themselves. New actors do not so much ask
for an increase in state intervention, to guarantee security and well-being, but especially resist the expansion of political-administrative intervention in daily life and defend personal autonomy. Other important attempt to relate social-structural change to mass collective action has come from Manuel Castells (1983, 1996). In an earlier phase of his work, Castells has contributed to our understanding of the emergence of urban social movements by stressing the importance of consumption processes (in particular of collective consumption of public services and public goods) for class relations, by moving the focus of class analysis from capitalist relations within the workplace to social relations in the urban community (Castell 1983). Later Castells linked the growing relevance of conflicts on identity both in the West- e.g. the women’s movement- and in the South- e.g. Zapatistas, religious fundamentalists, etc – to the emergence of a “network society,” where new information technologies play a central role.

How do we define issues as worthy objects, and actors as worthy subjects of collective action?

When existing systems of meaning do not constitute a sufficient basis for social action, new norms emerges, defining the existing situation as unjust and providing a justification for action (Turner and Killian 1987:259). Change, in fact, is conceived of as part of the physiological functioning of the system: social movements are accompanied by the emergence of new rules and norms, and represent attempts to transform existing norms. Since the 1980s, the integrationist version of the theory of collective behavior has stressed the processes of symbolic production and of construction of identity, both of which are essential components of collective behavior. In the 1990s, however, some researchers grew dissatisfied with a view of the role of culture in collective action that they regarded as too strategic and rationalistic (in particular schools like Snow Benford 1988, 1992, who were conversant with resource mobilization theory), and started to reemphasize again the part played by emotions in the production and reproduction of social movements. In their view, symbolic production id not only strategically oriented, but it involves more feelings and emotions. Moral shocks developing when deeply held rules and norms are broken are often the first step in individual mobilization; and, indeed, protest organizations work at transforming fear into moral indignation and anger (Jasper 1997:107-14). Movements produce condensing symbols and rhetoric oriented to raise various types of emotions in what has been defined as a libidinal economy of movements.

How is collective action possible?

American sociologists in the 1970s started to reflect on the processes by which the resources necessary for collective action are mobilized. In their view, collective movements constitute an extension of the conventional forms of political action; then actors engage in this act in a rational way, following their interests; organizations and movement “entrepreneurs” have an essential role in mobilization of collective resources on which action is formed. The basics questions addressed relate to the evaluation of cost and benefits in participation in social movements organizations. The capacity for mobilization depends on the material resources (work, money, concrete benefits, services) and/or nonmaterial resources (authority, moral engagement, faith, friendship) available to the group. Beyond the existence of
tensions, mobilization derives from the way in which social movements are able to organize discontent, reduce the costs of action, utilize and create solidarity networks, share incentives among members, and achieve external consensus. They type and nature of the resources available explains the tactical choices mad by movements and the consequence of collective action on the social and political system (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Edwards and McCarthy 2004).

**What are the determinants of the forms and intensity of collective action?**

The most urgent and systematic response to this question has come from the perspective usually defined as “political process” (Tilly 1978; McADAM 1982). This approach share with resource mobilization theory a rational view of action but pays more systematic attention to the political and institutional environment in which social movements operate. The central focus of “political process” theories is the relationship between institutional political actors and protest. The concept which has had the greatest success in defining the properties of the external environment, relevant to the development of social movements is that of “political opportunity structure.” To these others have added, relating to the institutional conditions which regulate agenda-setting and decision-making processes. Characteristics relating to the functional division of power and also to geographical decentralization have been analyzed in order to understand the origins of protest and the forms it has taken. In general, the aim has been to observe which stable ort “mobile” characteristics of the political system influence the growth of less – institutionalized political action in the course of what are defined as protest cycles (Tarrow 1989a), as well as the froms which these actions take in different historical contexts (Tilly 1978).

**Discussion**

Collective action broadly refers to individuals sharing resources in pursuit of collective goals – i.e., goals that cannot be privatized to any of the members of the collectivity on behalf of which collective action has taken place. Such goals may be produced within movements, but also in many contexts that normally are not associated with movements. For example, political parties and also face the problem of mobilizing their member and providing them with incentive to join and somehow support the organization- if anything through the payment of membership fees; so do interest groups only minding the sectoral- often, very parochial- interests of their specific reference groups (Knoke 1990a; Jordan and Maloney 1997). Let us say that the experience of social movements reflects phenomena with more than passing analogies to other instances political or cultural collective action, taking place within political parties, interest groups, or religious sects.

**References**


Questions

1. What is social protest?

2. What are the critical aspects of social movements?

3. What are the key elements involved in social movements?

4. Explain the significance of organisational process in social movements.

5. Critically analyse whether social change is creating conditions for emergence of new social movements.

6. Explain the various dimensions of collective action.