

Issues and Debates on Social Movement: A Theoretical Analysis

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“No success or achievement in material terms is worthwhile unless it serves the needs and interests of the Country and its people” – JRD Tata

ABSTRACT

The term ‘social movement’ has enlightened Sociology in its manner which has different perspectives and wider scope by nature. Social movements are essentially related to social change and therefore to the social structure. This does not mean that a social movement is a necessary condition of social change; on the contrary, social change can take place independently of social movements through the operation of impersonal forces and factors. Nor does it mean that it is invariably change-promoting, it can be, equally, change-resisting.

INTRODUCTION

The study of social movements is among one of the largest and most broadly conceived of all the many sub-fields within the discipline of sociology. While some researchers study the rise of specific social movement organizations at particular points in history, other researchers look at macro-level trends and events in an attempt to link various large scale demographic, economic and political transformations to the emergence of regional, national, and even global social movements (Goldstone 1991; Tarrow 1998). The diversity of approaches used to study different forms of collective action also vary widely. Some researchers focus their attention on the media and its impact on social movement actors (McAdam et al. 1996), while others look at the impact of poverty and social class on the rise of social movements (Piven and Cloward 1977; Piven and Cloward 1988). There are yet other scholars who explore identity factors and the emergence of new sets of common interests that unite disparate peoples across great physical distances and from different cultures and political systems (Laclau 1985; Melucci 1996; Slater 1985). As if the breadth of different modes of inquiry into social movements weren’t enough, researchers also work on groups of vastly differing sizes. William Gamson conducted a series of controlled laboratory experiments with small groups of individuals in order to study the way that collective action frames are constructed through small group conversations (Gamson 1992). On the other hand, Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol and Sydney Tarrow have studied social revolutions at the national and cross-national levels. While the former studied groups of four and five individuals, the latter examined groups that range in size from one to one hundred million (Skocpol 1994; Tarrow 1998; Tilly; Tilly 1978).

Social movements are a product of the social structure and hence emerge out of certain conditions in the social structure. Social movements have consequences for the social structure of which they are the products. Social movements themselves have a recognizable structure in terms of which they are rendered functional relative to their goals. Therefore, a social movement is a product of the social structure and has consequences for it, it is an ‘agent’ of change (though not the only one), and at the same time it has a ‘target’ on which it operates. A sociologically meaningful study of a social movement will remain incomplete unless both these aspects are welded into a single theoretical framework. Generally in the studies of social

movements the emphasis is on evolution and structure of the movement, its ideology, its sequential progression or regression, its mistakes and so on, with hardly any analysis of the causes of its emergence, or the consequences for the target(s) on which it operates. Hence the need for a clear conceptualization of social movements and a theoretical framework for a comprehensive empirical study. (Partha Nath Mukherji)

The tradition of analyzing social movements in sociology is enveloped in the study of the processes of social change. For example, the structural– functional approach, for which role is the basic unit of analysis, views change in terms of three basic processes—structural differentiation, reintegration and adaptation. According to this sequential model of change, a movement may appear in any one of the stages depending upon certain system conditions. Thus, emergence of specialized and autonomous units, elaboration of division of labour and intensification of role specialization may release considerable stresses and strains in the system rendering one or another social category socially deprived which in turn may inspire movements. But these movements are viewed as temporary aberrations, essentially pathological, indeed indicative of transient anomies. Movements are thus incapable of effecting

Long-term and ongoing processes of change because, specialization permits maximum control over the environment by assuming more effective roles and creating more efficient units. In this tradition, then, movements are viewed as necessary accompaniments of the tension released by structural differentiation and movement manipulation as a tension-management mechanism by specialized role incumbents. Since differentiation renders prevalent roles and norms obsolete it is necessary to develop new mechanisms of reintegration, which follows a three phase model. Due to dissatisfaction men no longer perform roles adequately, this is followed by protests by the deprived who organize movements and finally new mechanisms of regulation and coordination such as unions, associations and welfare agencies are created to mobilize resources and commitments. Inevitably a more flexible and specialized system emerges. Thus movements are viewed essentially as adaptive mechanisms in a period of rapid social change. With adaptation change is institutionalized. (T.K Ommen)

Theoretical Traditions: Marx, Durkheim & Smith

The study of contemporary social movements comes largely out of three different theoretical traditions, functionalism, Marxism and liberal-individualism. The theorists most clearly associated with each of these traditions are Karl Marx, the French sociologist Emile Durkheim and early Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke, Thomas Hobbes and especially Adam Smith.

Durkheim and Functionalism: The Foundation of Collective Behavior Theory:- In *The Rules of the Sociological Method*, Durkheim elaborated a biological analogy for the study of society. In Durkheim's terminology, society is similar to a living organism whereby the organism itself is made up of groups of interdependent cells that, together, constitute the various organs of the body. Each of these organs are, in turn, responsible for a specific biological function which contributes to the overall constitution of the organism as a whole. Society, for Durkheim, can be conceptualized in much the same way. Individuals in society are like cells within the body. The cells themselves depend on the smooth and uninterrupted functioning of other cells, and of the organs, which ensures the continuing survival of the organism as a whole. According to Durkheim each individual cell carries out a specific function within the social body and he believed that the natural state of the social body is in a state of systemic equilibrium. It is from this biological metaphor that Durkheim gets the twin notions of healthy, versus pathological, forms of social organization. And, the unitary and solidifying concept of social function that characterizes much of the early sociological work on social movements.

Durkheim's notion of social equilibrium was extremely influential among early sociologists and was largely integrated into the theoretical foundations of functionalism. As a theoretical model, functionalism was most vividly represented by the norm-oriented work of Neil Smelser and Talcott Parsons whose writings attempted to link the work of earlier neo-liberal political philosophers to the field of sociology.

Neil Smelser's 1963 book *The Theory of Collective Behavior* begins from the social equilibrium perspective and draws this perspective out into a full-blown theory of norm-oriented social movements. According to Smelser, shared values and norms form the basic foundations of social organization. He gives an example of the different collective behavior response that might be precipitated by a black family moving into a white neighborhood (Smelser 1963). These include panic selling, violent outbursts and/or the emergence of a norm oriented movement aimed at creating restrictive covenants designed to prevent additional blacks from moving into the neighborhood. The norm-oriented movement in this case is the result of two factors: Structural strain in the form of changes in the socioeconomic mobility of blacks, and precipitating factors which in this case are the negative attitudes whites hold towards blacks. In turn, the development of a norm-oriented movement is also either facilitated, or impeded, by the actor's perceptions of effective means to challenge the situation that has aroused them. This actual process of bringing about changes, such as the ability to pass a restrictive covenant, is also either facilitated, or impeded, by agencies of social control. For example, when the Civil Rights Act was passed by the US Congress in 1964, the state and its various enforcement agencies exerted negative pressure on norm oriented movements that attempted to restrict the rights of blacks to buy homes in white neighborhoods. In this way, agents of social control can exert influence over the structural conduciveness for particular types of norm-oriented social movements. But Smelser introduced a twist into theories of social movements during the 1960s by distinguishing between collective behavior and social movements.

Marx & Engels: The Structure of Social Conflict:- In *The Communist Manifesto* Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels outline a materialist conception of history that borrows heavily from Georg Hegel's philosophical work on the dialectical process of arriving at truth (Marx 1978). Marx's most valuable sociological insight was a radical critique of the capitalist economy and its influence on social structures. Unlike Durkheim, Marx wrote directly on the subject of social movements, though he concentrated most of his work at the macro-political and structural/economic levels. While Marx did not attempt to analytically distinguish the constituent components of social movements, he did formulate a theory of social change that solidly located the labor movement at the forefront of social change. Marx related the rise of a modern labor movement to the structural conditions created by the modern capitalist economy, and he also attempted to situate social action within a historical framework of class conflict. While Marx had a tremendous influence on modern sociology, most sociologists reject his more radical writings on the irreversible and teleological movement of modern society towards communism. However, even if Marx's vision of our future was utopian, his basic contributions provided a much needed challenge to the apolitical, status-quo oriented theories of functionalism.

The basic components of Marx's theory that are relevant to the study of social movements include several related concepts. The first, and most important, is his underlying theory of the materialist conception of history, or historical materialism. Marx believed that social structures such as education, laws, government and the economy were primarily the products of the material conditions of society. By material conditions, Marx referred to the specific physical means by which human beings provide for their own life needs. These physical means of social reproduction include the production of food and shelter as well as less tangible institutions such as religion, language and other cultural products. Fundamentally, Marx believed that human beings are, by their very nature, productive creatures. The fact that we constantly produce leads Marx to the conclusion that at some point in history humans reached a stage where they produced more than they consumed. As individuals began to accumulate and stockpile surplus goods, or capital, the first signs of political struggle also began to emerge. According to Marx, in all modern societies a political division over property develops as some individuals accumulate more capital, through their own labor or the labor of others, than their neighbors do. This leads to a situation where different groups within society oppose one another over their control of surplus goods and capital. According to Marx's theory of economic determinism, the social structures that develop out of such an environment inevitably reflect the material

realities of the culture. In this way, Marx accounts for historical progress through a variety of stages (primitive communism, feudalism, capitalism, modern communism, etc.) based on the material conditions underlying each stage of society.

New Social Movements Theory

The historical conjuncture at which many of the new social movements emerged in the Third World was characterized by, on the one hand, an ongoing crisis in post-war ideologies and institutions, such as development, the nation-state and democracy, and, on the other, an inability or failure of existing counter systemic movements and institutions to address themselves issues raised by this crisis. The mid 1960s was the time when sociological studies concluded beyond any doubt that the development programs launched by the governments of the Third World countries had benefited largely those who were already better off, leaving the poor largely unaffected. It is this failure of the development strategy that led to the

Rise of small groups as agencies of people's initiative in favour of the alienated and the oppressed. While RM theory and its several variants remained popular in the U.S., a competing paradigm arose in the late 1980's from Europe. Originally a reaction Marxism's inability to explain social movements that were not based strictly on economic interest (e.g., the environmental movement as compared to the labor movement), this alternative paradigm attempted to explain why these new types of movements arose. Scholars such as William Gamson (1988), Bert Klandermans (1988), Alberto Melucci (1982), and Claus Offe (1985), began to study the values that drive social movements, the collective identities of their members, and how their grievances and alternatives they proposed were being influenced by larger changes in the social structure. New social movements theory (NSM) points out that many social movements in western, more postmodern societies display characteristics fundamentally different from those of earlier social movements, that include: a rejection of metanarratives, strategies that combine personal and collective actions, a set of post-materialist goals (Klandermans and Tarrow 1988), a cultural rather than political focus, and a decentralized form of organization (Tracy 1999). NSM theory is currently the most widely accepted social movement paradigm in Europe and has a growing number of adherents in the U.S.

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