Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice

Social Movements, Sociology Of

A good way of tracing the history of social movements is to first distinguish between the old social movements (the preindustrial age to mid-20th century) and the new **[p. 1306 ↓]** social movements (the postindustrial age, or from the mid-20th century). Perhaps, the first documented social movements in human history were those associated with the French Revolution of 1759, the Polish Constitution of May 3, 1791, and the proletarian revolution in Russia. These were all old social movements and emerged when such collective behavior patterns were seen as mainly aberrations and were subsequently viewed as violations of the social order.

To see social movements as representing a collective effort to effect a given change or avert a change from occurring may be very restrictive because social movements are varied in objectives, nature, and causative factors. Therefore, while not ignoring the change value of social movements especially when representative of the mass of civil society, one might analytically benefit more by looking at social movements as social phenomenon indicative of some significant need/aspirations in the social system. In other words, they should be perceived first as significant social agents before a change value is attributed to them. After all, a social movement may exist to promote an ideal or altruism that has no practical connection to change in the context of the present social order.

Toward a Sociology of Social Movements

The importance of the sociological study of social movements derives from a couple of reasons especially in the present postindustrial society characterized by a proliferation of social movements. Some of the reasons that have made sociology of social movements imperative include:

From the aforementioned reasons, the sociology of social movements represents nothing but the systematic attempt to understand and interpret social movements as social phenomenon. In this exercise, social movements are seen as indicative of the rejection/dissatisfaction of the civil society with the social order or otherwise. In this analytical framework, social movements are not important only as agents of

social change but as increasingly reflective of the participation of the civil society in legitimizing, disputing, and modifying the social order and structure of the society.

Types of Social Movements

Social movements can be analytically differentiated in so many ways. These include differentiation on the basis of degree or nature of change desired, the target of change, and type of change desired:

In spite of the above classifications, it is important to understand that the nature of any social movement depends on the extent of the perceived problem or situation leading to its emergence. Basically, social movements are agencies of the civil society and are reactions against existing social order or attempts to change the social order. In this sense, it is the discrepancy or imbalance between the civil society and social order that generates social movements, and their radicalism or extent of change desired depends mainly on the extent of the perceived imbalance or discrepancy.

Characteristics of Social Movements

Sociologists Emmanuel Igbo and Edlyne Anugwom have seen social movements as predominantly characterized by four main attributes. These are:

The Social Structure and Social Movements

Whether social movements are defined as generators of needed change or as promoters of the status quo, they do not emerge in a vacuum. In this sense, social movements emerge in tandem with the existing conditions in the society. That is, it is the nature of the social structure or society concerned that determines the emergence of social movements even in the modern society. Therefore, no matter how extreme a given social pathology, discrepancy between the social order and civil society, level of education or literacy in the society, or contradictions in the social structure, social movements can only emerge in the context of some specific preconditions. For

instance, in spite of the dearth of human rights and scarce material resources in the old Soviet Union, social movements hardly emerged. As a result, some preconditions call forth social movements, in addition to the basic characteristics of the social structure. These include:

There is apparently no gainsaying the fact that social movement is a product or at least a manifestation of the social structure. In this sense, the nature and acceptance of social movements depend on the social structure of the society concerned. This may largely explain why there has been a massive wave of social movements in the postindustrial age. In other words, the postindustrial social structure has been conducive to the growth of social movements. Specific factors in this growth include the massive wave of urbanization, emergence of mass education and modern communications technologies, democracy and human rights, and so on.

Theories and Approaches to the Study of Social Movements

One can clearly talk about theories and approaches to the study or explanation of social movements. In the sociological tradition, while theories are perceived as making definite statements of relationship between two or more variables, approaches are largely useful in terms of their logical explanations and informed insights on the nature of phenomena. Approaches are simply logical and reasonable ways of explaining phenomena while theories are often empirically backed and specific statements of relationship seen as in line with the systematic and/or scientific nature of a discipline. Therefore, sociology of social movements may make a distinction between theories of social movements and approaches to the study of social movements.

Approaches

The New Social Movements Approach

One approach to the study of social movements in contemporary society is the new social movements approach. In this approach, social movements are seen as representing both symptoms of contradictions as well as the solutions to these contradictions in the society. Beyond this, the approach makes a clear analytical distinction between the so-called old social movements that existed in industrial society (pre-1950 for instance) and the new social movements, which exist in the contemporary postindustrial society. It argues that because the industrial society produced mainly contradictions in classes (i.e., on the basis of material possession/access), old social movements arose specifically to redress this perceived material imbalance. But the postindustrial society has broadened the basis of contradiction, a contradiction that emerges from the dissonance between the increasing autonomy and freedom of the individual and the increasing regulation of all spheres of life by the society. The contradiction here is basically nonmaterial and touches different spheres of life, such as the issue of ecology, gender, religion, warfare, and governance. Perhaps, the increase in the basis of contradiction in the postindustrial society explains the proliferation of social movements in such a society. Probably, the greatest weakness of this approach apart from a methodological broadness that nullifies its usage for any peculiar case (it is too-general an explanation) is its failure to establish the precise origin of social movements. Jürgen Habermas's contention that new conflicts arise in the areas of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization, while insightful, loses sight of the fact that the Euro-American nations do not represent the entire globe and that even where conflicts arise over the political system, such a conflict may equally be driven by the struggle for the control of material or economic resources of society.

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The New Values Approach

This is more or less the flip side of the new social movements approach, or more appropriately, a semantically different representation of the new social movement approach. The basic premise of this approach is that there is a huge change in value systems between the pre-1945 societies and the post-1945 societies. The new value system is no longer material but transcends it to include even aesthetics and morality. According to this explanation, the economic prosperity and political stability in the post-1945 western societies have allowed a decreased emphasis on material values and an increased emphasis on postmaterial values.

The Action-Identity Paradigm

Alain Touraine has provided a very good elaboration of this approach, which sees social movements as symbols of social progress and emancipation. It adopts an interesting class conflict analysis that while reminiscent of Marxism is anchored on different variables. In the first instance, it sees class conflict as sociocultural and not socioeconomic and revolves around the control of knowledge and investment and not really the means of production. This conflict takes place in the postindustrial "programmed" society with a different type of class relations from the old capitalist industrial society. For this approach, social movements rise to challenge the established institutional forms and underlying norms of knowledge and investment, which are impositions of the ruling class or the group in control of processes of socioeconomic reproduction. This approach, while presenting an interesting variant of class analysis, falls short of pinpointing the process through which social movements emerge, as well as the ultimate objective of such movements beside overthrowing established norms of knowledge and investment. In this sense, the approach does not show at what point of ruling class domination social movements emerge. It also fails to establish the precise type or nature of sociocultural reality the social movements champion. It fails to show what happens after the old form of sociocultural reality has been jettisoned. However, retention of the idea of class, while positing a radical change of society from a material to a postmaterial one remains largely anachronistic and confusing.

Theories

There are about five theoretical explanations of social movements. These theories should be seen as the building blocks of sociology of social movement because they represent socially constructed images/perceptions of reality, which trigger off collective behavior. These theories are:

The Structural—Strain Theory

This is the handiwork of Neil Smelser. This theory isolates six characteristic factors that generate social movements. These factors are as follows:

Perhaps the major weakness of the theory is that it is too encompassing to serve as a specific explanation of reality. It tries to draw on aspects of every other explanation of social movement. In this sense, the logic of the six factors ignores the possibility of spontaneous revolt or action before even a movement is **[p. 1311 ↓]** articulated. Also social movements may not always unwaveringly follow these steps.

The Resource Mobilization Theory

This orientation sees resources and their proper mobilization as keys to the development and success of social movements. Resources imply financial, human, and material, as well as social support or connection. Therefore, social movements arise when people who are aggrieved or discontented are capable to mobilize resources sufficiently to take action toward addressing their problems.

The premise underlying this theory is that social movements are not merely products of social grievance or discontent but arise when there is a coincidence of sufficient resources and social grievance. In other words, no matter how aggrieved people may be, the unavailability or inadequacy of resources may hinder organization of a social movement type reaction. This theory has four core assumptions:

This theory can be criticized for overemphasizing resources, especially financial resources. Social movements often depend more on collective resolve and commitment of the members than on finance.

Deprivation Theory

This is the idea that social movements are engendered by deprivation. People who are deprived of some resources are those who generate social movements. Denton Morrison sees individuals who are lacking some good, service, or comfort as more likely to form a social movement to improve their conditions than others.

The main issue with this theory is that deprivation of one thing or another, and at one time or another, is a regular feature of life for an overwhelming majority of the members of the society. Also, the relative nature of social deprivation takes away the potency of this explanation because some feelings of deprivation are based essentially on ideals or comparison with a select few significant others. Moreover, deprivation alone can hardly spur any sustainable social movement.

Political Process Explanation

This explanation is hinged mainly on political opportunities. It is one of the prominent explanations of the resurgence of the new social movements. The theory posits that there are three vital or key components of movement formation. These components must be available before movement formation. They are insurgent consciousness—which is like the feeling of social deprivation and grievances but with a consciousness of it (i.e., people should not only be deprived but must feel this deprivation and the sense of injustice arising from it); organizational strength—the existence of strong leaders; and adequate resources to channel the sense of injustice into appropriate social action. Political opportunity is therefore the receptivity or vulnerability of the existing political system to challenge or confrontation. The receptivity may be a result of any of the following: increase in political pluralism, elite/ruling class disunity, decline or relaxation of repression, elite support for organized opposition and opening-up of the political

space. The strong emergence of any of these factors may lead to social movement formation.

In spite of the fact that this theory highlights the crucial issues of the point in time a social movement emerges or is due, it adopts a largely political approach that severely neglects the social and cultural dimensions to social movements. Social movements are not strictly speaking political movements but have also sociocultural implications.

The Culture Theory

This arose out of the need to address the perceived weakness of the political process explanation. In this sense, it stresses the crucial importance of movement **[p. 1312 ↓]** culture, as well as the basis of people's active involvement, especially in terms of the so-called free-rider problem.

This theory, while cognizant of the issue of deprivation, brings the injustice arising from it to the forefront. It posits that for social movements to successfully mobilize members they must develop an injustice frame (i.e., ideas and symbols that show how big or significant the problem and how/what the movement can do to take care of it). Perhaps, more insightful is that the theory tries to tackle the free-rider problem. It recognizes that because social movements take up people's resources, people may not be willing to participate or get involved if the outcomes they desire can still come about in spite of their non-participation. Therefore, free riding is that the individual believes that the movement can succeed without him or her and therefore avoids participation (i.e., save his or her own resources and ultimately gets the benefits of the movement's activities).

As a result, a big puzzle for scholars of social movements is to explain why people still join movements if they believe such movements will still succeed without them. One critical explanation of this is through adopting the injustice frame and arguing that people's sense of injustice may overcome their reluctance to join if the movements properly focus on the injustice as the backbone of their activities.

Development of Sociology of Social Movements

Given the relevance of history to the sociological enterprise, sociology of social movements is cautious of the historical evolution of the phenomenon and its study. Therefore, one can isolate four distinct stages in the evolution of social movement analysis over time. These stages, perhaps more than anything else, clearly define the linkage between society or social structure and social movements. These four main stages of growth are:

Thus, social movements became characterized as universal features of the modern state. This represents equally the stage of greatest challenge to sociological knowledge because social movements moved from a phenomenon that can be easily pigeon-holed or unidirectionally interpreted to a massive area of sociological concern given that the social structure is the object and subject of social movements. Thus, issues of definitions, approaches, and methodology became reinforced. As Philip Smith argues, this era gave rise to an ample field of study of social movements. In this sense, social movement came to acquire a distinct disciplinary form different from the general area of collective behavior.

Methodological Issues in the Sociology of Social Movements

One methodological challenge in the sociology of social movements is the problem of the classification of the diverse or variegated spectrum of social **[p. 1313 ↓]** movements. In other words, the proliferation of social movements in major spheres of society has presented problems of analytical and explanatory unity, cross country comparisons, and the universalization of explanations.

Flowing from this core methodological problem is the issue of how to go about investigating social movements. In this case, what are the important and universal

indicators of social movement, which separates it from other forms of collective behavior and what should constitute the focus of research interest—the number of members/ groups of social movements or the cultural and/or subjective characteristics and implications of social movements, as well as whether social movements should be taken as dependent or independent variables.

There is also the question of the apparent universalization of the dichotomy between new and old social movements, an idea that is premised on the assumption that all contemporary societies are in the postindustrial stage of development. However, it is apparent that while social movements are to be found in various societies, not all these societies are at the stage of postindustrialism. Such a dichotomy demands caution in its analytical utilization.

Finally, there is need to see social movements not merely as purely ideological and/ or philosophical/political agencies but rather more as highly subjective, culture-laden, and related to the social structure and values. This problem can be restated in terms of the challenge to adopt a neopositivistic empirical orientation to the study of social movements or to take social movements as representing cultural and symbolic realities in the society (i.e., as cultural phenomena), which can be more meaningfully analyzed as system of meanings.

Emergent Challenges and Directions

The foregoing has provided a fairly encompassing but not exhaustive overview of the general concerns of sociology of social movements. These concerns may be seen as forming more or less the defining attributes of the discipline. However, a contemporary sociology of social movements may go beyond these orthodoxies to include the following concerns at a minimum:

Examples of Social Movements

Prominent social movements in history and contemporary times include the following:

Edlyne Anugwom

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See also

Further Reading

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