

**CHANGING THE WORLD:
AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

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CHAPTER 1

WHY SOCIAL MOVEMENTS MATTER

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN HISTORY

Societies change over time, and for many different reasons. For example, technological innovations can have profound affects on human societies. The invention and mass availability of the birth control pill enabled women to reliably control their fertility for the first time in human history. This, in turn, was one factor that increased the number of women in the paid workforce, as it gave women the choice to limit the number of children they bore. The Industrial Revolution led to the widespread use of fossil fuels (gasoline, coal, etc.), creating changes in the earth's atmosphere that contribute to global warming. One important consequence is rising sea levels from the melting of the polar ice caps: this has already destroyed crops on the island nation of Tuvalu, and its thousands of residents are planning for an evacuation as sea levels continue to rise. Cataclysmic events can precipitate social change as well. The Great Depression of the 1930s brought economic ruin to many individuals and communities, but led ultimately to the formation of our social welfare system which included Social Security and other programs to aid the poor.

In the United States, the most popular explanation for social change is the "Great Man" theory of history. This theory holds that the actions and ideas of influential individuals are the primary motor of historical change. In high schools civics classes students learn about a succession of U.S. presidents, generals, inventors, and entrepreneurs. Certainly such individuals have helped make history, but to focus exclusively on them neglects the important role that organized groups of ordinary people play in shaping societies. Howard Zinn's classic work, *A People's History of the United States* (1980), paints a bottom-up view of American history which illustrates that from the time of the American Revolution, groups of people have repeatedly marched, made speeches, and even taken up arms in an attempt to change their society. They have not always succeeded, but ours would be a very different society without them. Think, for example, of how the labor movement, one of the oldest social movements in the U.S., changed the way employees are treated. A pro-labor bumper sticker reads, "The Labor Movement: The Folks Who Brought You the Eight-Hour Work Day."

So, to study social movements is to pay attention to a neglected side of U.S. history. There are other reasons to study them as well. One is to learn from past experience. Social movements have proliferated to the point that some sociologists dub this a "social movement society." Can contemporary social movements increase their chances of success by examining what worked and didn't work for movements of the past? Another reason to study social movements is because of the hope that they provide for those looking for ways to have a positive impact on the world. Many of the courses I teach immerse students in

learning about the origins and consequences of various forms of inequality in U.S. society, such as racial and ethnic discrimination, gender discrimination, and the rich-poor gap. At some point I realized how disempowering this can be--to present what are severe, very real social problems without discussing what individuals and groups are doing to solve them. Studying social movements, then, is a crucial component of our education as citizens, as member of a society that not only influences us, but which we have a responsibility to shape.

WHAT IS A SOCIAL MOVEMENT?

A social movement is a collective effort, with some degree of formal organization, that is oriented toward promoting or resisting change in a society, using means outside institutional channels or utilizing such channels in innovative ways. (Be aware that not all sociologists agree with this definition; some important controversies in defining social movements are discussed below.) (You can read scholars' different definitions of social movements, compiled by Benita Roth, at <http://womhist.binghamton.edu/socm/definitions.htm>.)

a collective effort

A social movement involves people working together; one individual does not make a social movement. However, there are different ways to take part in a movement. Sociologists distinguish between various roles within a movement with regard to both people's beliefs and actions.

In terms of *beliefs*, there are:

- **adherents**: individuals who support a movement's goals (but who may or may not identify themselves as part of the movement itself). For example, someone who opposed the 2003 U.S. war against Iraq, but dislikes the antiwar movement itself (for example, because she believes the demonstrations are too confrontational) is an adherent of that movement. This person would then not technically be part of the movement.
- **constituents**: individuals who support a movement's goals and identify as part of a movement. They are a subset of the larger pool of adherents. *Conscience constituents* are part of a social movement even though they do not stand to benefit directly from its success. An example is heterosexual people who become involved in efforts to legalize gay marriage. *Beneficiary constituents* are individuals who stand to benefit if the movement realizes its goals. In the example above, same-sex couples are the beneficiaries of efforts to legalize gay marriage. Beneficiaries may or may not be adherents of a social movement that is created to benefit them. For example, many women were not (and are not) part of the feminist movement, though they benefit from its gains.

In terms of *actions*, we can distinguish between:

- **contributors**: individuals who give resources (like money) to a movement. They may or may not take more active roles in the movement.

- **participants:** individuals who take an active part in a social movement (beyond simply contributing resources). For example, they attend meetings or demonstrations.
- **members:** contributors and participants who are formally associated with some organization within a social movement. As discussed below, a social movement is typically made up of one or more organizations. Movements per se do not have members, but particular organizations within a movement can. Some social movement organizations allow people to become members simply by contributing money. In others, membership has more requirements.
- **activists:** individuals whose participation in the movement involves a high degree of effort and sacrifice. They are also termed **organizers**. They are the core of the movement, and include its leaders. They are typically among the first to become involved in a movement and are most likely to remain involved as the movement subsides.

Note that being part of a social movement involves action--hence, a group of people that shares a set of beliefs, but does not act on them collectively, does not constitute a social movement. Of course, shared beliefs is a prerequisite for forming a social movement, and one of the puzzles that sociologists address with their research is under what conditions which such “unmobilized sentiment pools” (McAdam and Snow 1997: xxi) are induced to act collectively on behalf of those beliefs. And, a major task for social movement activists is how to turn adherents into contributors and participants.

with some degree of organization

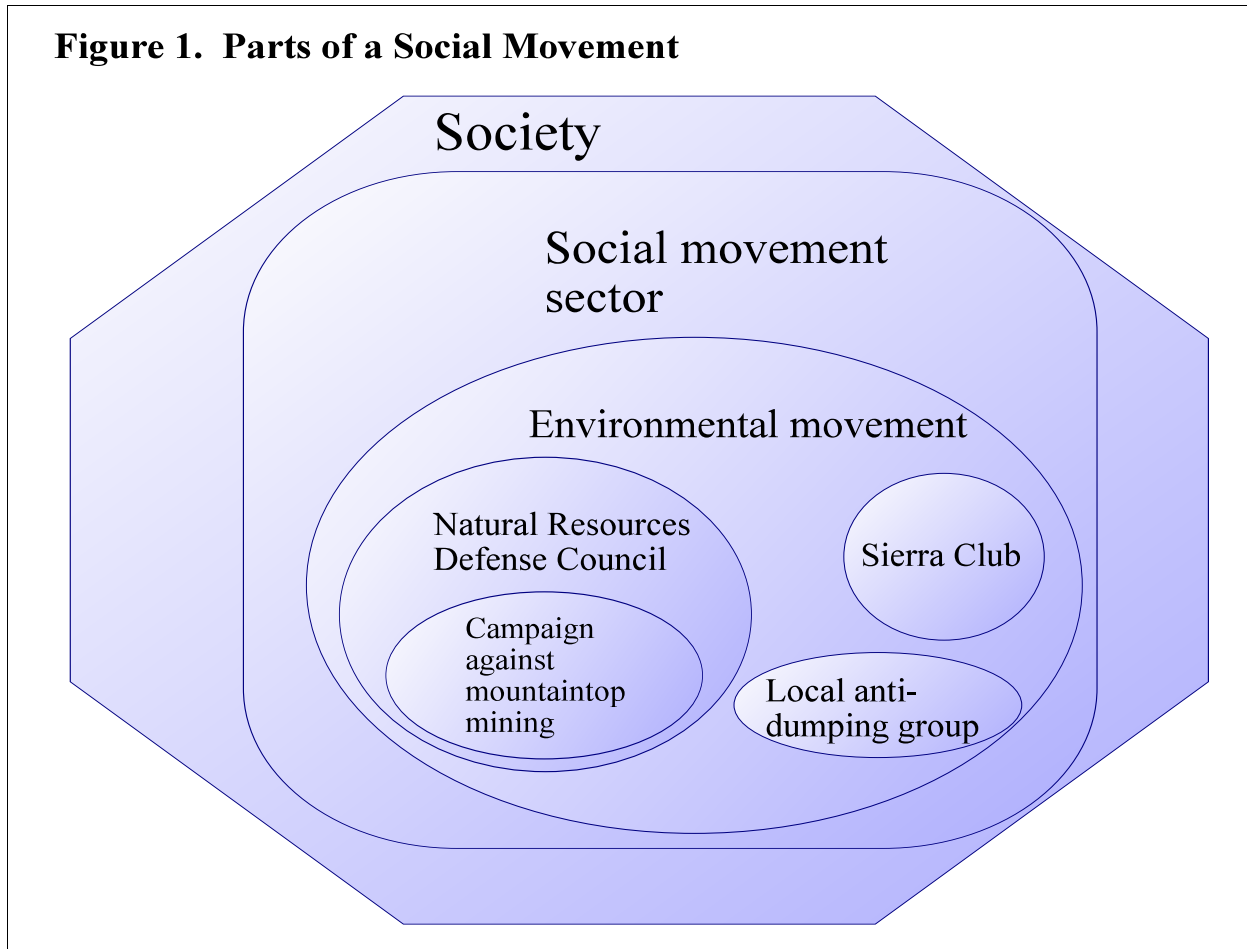
For people to act collectively with any effectiveness, they must coordinate their activities: this requires organization. This part of the definition distinguishes social movements from mobs, riots, fads, or fashions, which are examples of collective, but relatively unorganized, behaviors.

The set of social movements in existence in a society at any one time is the **social movement sector**. A social movement typically consists of one or more **social movement organizations** (SMO's), which are relatively stable groups characterized by some degree of formal organization (they have established structures and rules for making decisions and carrying out activities) (McCarthy and Zald 1973). For example, as show in Figure 1, the environmental movement includes the Sierra Club, the National Resources Defense Council, and many small local groups. The degree and type of organization varies among SMO's, however. Some are highly bureaucratized, with hierarchical positions and detailed policies and procedures. Others intentionally adopt a more decentralized form of organization, with rotating leadership positions and democratic decision-making processes.

When social movement participants engage in a series of actions in pursuit of some concrete goal, during a limited period of time, this is termed a **campaign**. During the civil rights movement, campaigns were waged, for example, to integrate buses in Montgomery, Alabama and to register voters in rural Mississippi. These individual campaigns were all part of the larger movement. In Figure 1, the example is a campaign against mountaintop removal mining in the Appalachian Mountains.

Because they are relatively more organized, social movements are more continuous and longer-lived than phenomena like riots and mobs. It is important to remember, though, that less

Figure 1. Parts of a Social Movement



organized, more spontaneous activities are also common in social movements--for example, a well-planned mass march of thousands of people marching in the streets to protest some government policy is bound to contain some spontaneous behaviors.

that challenges or defends existing institutional or cultural authority

Social movement goals have several dimensions. the locus of the change they seek; the direction of the change they seek; and the extent of change they seek. Keep in mind that in practice, goals are not always clearly articulated by movement activists.

Locus of change. Social movements can seek to alter either social institutions or culture, or both. (A *social institution* is a stable set of rules and relationships that regulates some aspect of social life, such as the economy, religion, government, education, and the family. Culture refers to shared values, beliefs, and practices.) Social movements that target social institutions for change focus on goals like enacting or repealing laws; changing government policies; ending discrimination against particular groups in government, education, or business; changing business practices; and the like. Some examples are the labor movement, the civil rights movement, and the pro-choice and pro-life movements. Most often,

movements that seek cultural changes are also concerned with institutional changes—for example, the pro-life movement strives to convince people that abortion is immoral, but also aims to pass laws that restrict access to abortion. Other movements focus mainly on changing some aspect of a society's culture.

Note that by specifying that a social movement challenges or defends some authority, I exclude from the definition collective efforts at changing society that face virtually no organized opposition—sometimes called consensus movement—such as the effort to stop drunk driving spearheaded by MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving). I also exclude organized efforts that primarily seek to change individuals, sometimes called **expressive movements**. These would include self-help movements like yoga, and many religious groups. Yet some efforts to promote individual change do so as means to social change, the idea being that if enough individuals change, then society does, by definition. Hence the line between expressive and instrumental movements is not always a clear one.

Direction of change. Movements that promote forward change, or progress, are labeled **progressive**, liberal, or left-wing. They seek to establish a state of affairs that has not existed in the past. Often, but not always, the beneficiaries of these movements are disadvantaged groups, such as women or racial-ethnic minorities. (The terms “left” and “right” as descriptions of political ideologies originated during the French Revolution, when proponents of the revolution sat on the left side of the French Assembly and opponents sat on the right.) Movements that resist change and seek to return to a real or imagined past are termed **conservative**, or right-wing. The pro-life movement and the Ku Klux Klan are examples. Very conservative movements are also called reactionary.

Be aware that these terms can be problematic. For example, the goal of the Native American rights movement is to resurrect the cultural traditions of Native Americans, which makes it a conservative movement. However, it also seeks greater equality and respect for Native Americans than currently exists, making it progressive. As you can see, which label fits best depends in part on one's time frame. Given that abortions are currently legal in the U.S., the pro-life could be seen as promoting change, hence progressive. However, given that it seeks to return to a time when abortions were not legal, it is conservative.

Extent of change. Reform movements seek limited or partial change within a society. For example, most groups within the labor movement pursue goals like higher wages and better benefits for employees, without altering the fundamental structure of the workplace or the large economy. **Radical movements** seek fundamental or total change. (Revolutionary movements are radical movements that specifically seek to overthrow the state.) Some segments of the labor, such as socialist organizations, are radical in that their goal is to eradicate capitalism and institute an economy in which productive property (factories, machinery, land) is communally owned and operated.

As noted in the example of the labor movement, reformist and radical tendencies can exist within a single movement, and often do when the movement is large. Within the feminist movement, the campaign to pass the Equal Rights Amendment was a reform effort: it sought to change the law, but not other aspects of society. The radical feminist branch of the movement, on the other hand, desires society-wide, fundamental change in male-female relationships.

using means outside institutional channels or utilizing such channels in innovative ways

Social institutions typically have established, agreed-upon (hence, perceived as legitimate) ways that people can make their voices heard--that they can exercise power. We can participate in the U.S. government by voting in elections, by putting referenda on state ballots, by writing to our congressional representatives, and the like. At colleges and universities, students can serve on various committees, vote in student government elections, or make an appointment to speak with the dean about an issue of concern. Social movements often utilize such institutional channels--for example, the Green Party in the U.S. can be seen as a wing of the environmental movement that runs candidates for political office (although this created great controversy within the environmental movement, as activists debated the advisability of working within or outside "the system"). Peace movement activists often call on supporters to contact their congressional representatives and urge them to vote for or against some piece of legislation. Nevertheless, the defining characteristic of a social movement is that it organizes people to act *outside* of such regular channels. Social movement participants march through the streets, hold rallies, conduct sit-ins, carry signs, organize economic boycotts, and the like (see Gene Sharp's "128 Methods of Nonviolent Action," at the end of chapter 7, for a taste of the many tactics that nonviolent movements have used). At other times, social movement participants use established institutional channels, but do so in innovative ways. At the 1968 Democratic National Convention, the Yippies nominated a pig for president to symbolize their dissatisfaction with the major parties' presidential candidates.

The use of noninstitutional means distinguishes social movements from interest groups, which are also collective, organized, and seek to promote or prevent change--but do so primarily using institutional channels like lobbying, letter writing, and distributing educational materials. Hence interest groups are situated within the mainstream political environment and enjoy some legitimacy, while social movements are centered outside the mainstream political environment and typically have less legitimacy with those inside it.

Why would a group choose to use noninstitutional methods to create change, when institutional ones are available? The answer is that not all groups have easy input in to major social institutions. People who form social movements oftentimes do so because they are excluded, for whatever reason, from accessing power through mainstream processes. For example, before the 1960s, African-Americans were effectively denied the right to vote or run for office in the southern United States. Hence the civil rights movement used tactics like sit-ins and marches to racially integrate southern society. As noted above, then, the people that form social movements--who resort to extra-institutional means of making change--are very often those who



Pigasus, the pig who was nominated for president by antiwar protesters outside the Democratic National Convention in 1968. This is an example of social movement activists using an established institutional channel (in this case, running for political office) in an innovative way.

are marginalized in a society, lacking full access to political, economic, or social power.

Some Phenomena That Are Not Social Movements

Social movements often overlap with, but are not identical to, the following phenomena.

- *Riots*: These may occur as part of a social movement, but they are unorganized and ephemeral, whereas a social movement is more organized and longer lasting.
- *Fads*: These are collective phenomenon but are not directed toward promoting or resisting change.
- *Interest groups*: These use primarily institutional means of making change, like lobbying public officials, whereas social movements use primarily noninstitutional means, but may use institutional means as well. Interest groups are “insiders” in the political system, accepted by target groups as legitimate, while social movements are “outsiders” who have not been granted legitimacy. Furthermore, while the focus of change for interest groups is the state, social movements may also target businesses or other institutions. Nevertheless, social movement organizations may evolve into interest groups as their demands become more acceptable.
- *Volunteerism*: Social movement participants are volunteers (unless they are paid staff members of an SMO), but not all people who do volunteer work are part of a social movement. Much volunteer work is essentially relief work—intended to provide temporary relief for some problem, but not focused on long-lasting institutional or cultural change. Furthermore, volunteering is technically an individual phenomenon, as it need not involve people working collectively. You can volunteer, by yourself, to pick up trash in a public park, for example.
- *Self-help movements or expressive movements*: These do not challenge or defend some authority, instead only seeking to change individuals.
- *Groups that share ideas but do not act together* (a study group; an intellectual trend).

Some Prominent Social Movements in U.S. History

abolitionist movement
American Revolution
animal rights movement
anti-globalization movement
anti-immigration movement
anti-lynching movement
anti-nuclear weapons movement
anti-sweatshop movement
anti-Vietnam War movement
Asian-American movement
battered women's movement
Black Power movement
Chicano/a movement
civil rights movement
conservative Christian movement
consumer safety movement
disability rights movement
drug legalization movement
environmental movement
environmental justice movement
father's rights movement
feminist movement
gay rights movement
homeless peoples' movement
labor movement
living wage movement
men's movement
Native American movement
nuclear freeze movement
pro-choice movement
pro-life movement
Puerto Rican independence movement
right-to-die (euthanasia) movement
sanctuary movement
socialist movement
student movement
temperance movement
transgendered movement
welfare rights movement
white supremacist movement
women's suffrage movement