

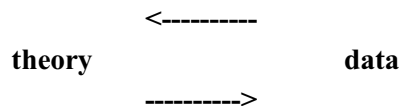
CHAPTER 2

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORIES

WHAT'S IMPORTANT ABOUT THEORY?

Most simply, a theory is an explanation for how the world works--typically an assertion about some cause-and-effect relationship. Most of our everyday actions are guided by theories, though we are not always conscious of it. A parent gives his child a time-out, for example, based on the theory that punishment will cause the child to alter his or her behavior. Social scientific theory is similar, but strives for a more complete and accurate understanding of the social world than commonsense theories like this typically provide.

Sometimes when people hear that something is a *theory*, they assume that it is not proven by the evidence--“it’s just a theory.” In actuality, some theories are well supported by evidence and some are not. We can think about sociological theories as interacting in a cyclical relationship with evidence from the social world. On the one hand, theories guide empirical research (investigations into the “real” world, or that which can be perceived with our senses). They tell the researcher what to look for, and where, to answer questions.



For example, in the field of social movements, collective identity theory holds that a major task of movements is to develop among participants a shared sense of who they are. This theory directs our attention to the internal dynamics of social movements, and particularly to the use of cultural symbols (clothing, speaking styles, ideas) to convey meanings about the group. In turn, the empirical evidence (data) that social scientists produce can uphold, refute, or modify established theories. For example, Richard Flacks’s 1971 study of young activists found that, contrary to the dominant social movement theories of the time, they were not marginalized misfits but were high achieving students from middle-class families.

Sociological theories vary according to which part of the social world they focus on, or their level of analysis.

- Macro-level (or macrosocial) theories address broad, society-wide patterns and historical changes (broad in terms of both time and space).

Examples of Macro-level Questions

Do economic crises facilitate or inhibit the rise of social movements?

How has the advent of the internet changed the extent and type of participation in social movements?

- Meso-level (or midrange) theories address social life in groups and organizations.

Examples of Meso-level Questions

How do SMO's that eschew hierarchical structures make group decisions?

How did the early feminist movement create a common culture that promoted solidarity?

- Micro-level theories addresses social interaction between individuals.

Examples of Micro-Level Questions

What factors contribute to an individual's decision to join a social movement?

How did participation in the civil rights movement affect activists' subsequent career decisions?

Sociological theories also vary by specificity--in other words, how detailed they are. Marxist theory, for example, is very broad: it includes ideas about the stages through which human societies develop; about where profit comes from under capitalism; and how capitalism will eventually fall. In fact, each of these ideas could be termed a theory in itself. Other theories are more detailed and apply to a more specific social domain: social network theory, for example, focuses on the role of social networks between people (friendships, membership in clubs, and the like) in promoting social movement participation.

It is useful to remember that different theories are not necessarily at odds with each other, and we need not choose one over another (though that may be appropriate at times). Instead, oftentimes theories simply highlight different aspects of the social world. A particular theory may be more useful than another for explaining a particular social phenomenon, or for investigating a particular aspect of that phenomenon.

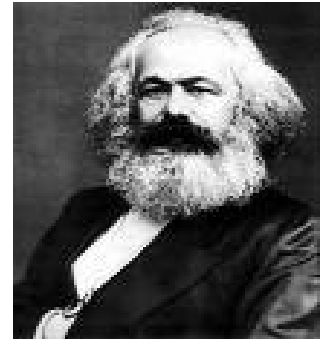
THE CLASSICAL THEORIES

Theories about the emergence, development, and decline of social movements have changed and developed over time. It is useful to chart this development, in part to familiarize ourselves with the different theories, or schools of thought, about social movements, and in part as an exercise in intellectual history. Ideas, including theories, do not simply spring forth out of the blue from the minds of great thinkers. Instead, they are profoundly shaped by the social environment of the thinker. In a course I recently took on Marx's philosophy, I learned that this brilliant man in fact drew heavily on the ideas of philosophers he had studied in school. His harsh criticism of capitalism is best understood in the context of his times: Marx was writing in the mid-1800s in London, when the new capitalist economy was creating unsurpassed wealth for some, but extreme misery for others. So, as we trace the development of

social movement theories, it is informative to look into what external social realities might have shaped them.

The European Tradition

Karl Marx (1818-1883) was perhaps the first modern social movement theorist, and he had much to say about social movements. Marx was German, but he spent most of his adult life in England. In much of his work, he collaborated with Frederick Engels. Marx's writings explicated the workings of capitalism as an economic system and provided a preliminary outline of the process by which a worldwide social movement of the proletariat (the working class) would eventually overthrow this system and usher in a communist era. Hence, Marxist theories focus primarily on class-based social movements, like the labor movement.



According to Marx, capitalism increasingly divides people into two groups. In a capitalist economic system, the **means of production** (anything used to produce goods, like factories, machines, and land) are privately owned by the **bourgeoisie**, or capitalist class. (It is easiest to conceptualize private ownership of the means of production by contrasting it with collective, or communal, ownership. Under collective ownership, factories and such would belong to the society at large, or perhaps some subgroup, such as a local community, or employees of the factory.) As legal owners, the bourgeoisie is entitled to the profits made from selling the goods produced by these means. (With collective ownership, profits would accrue to the collectivity.) The working class, or **proletariat**, is made up of those who do not own the means of production, and so in order to survive must sell their labor power to capitalists in exchange for wages. A third economic class is the petit-bourgeoisie (small business owners), but Marx stated that over time most in this class will fall into the proletariat as their businesses are unable to compete against large capitalist enterprises.

The relationship between the bourgeoisie and proletariat is inherently antagonistic. Business owners are in competition with each other to maximize profit, which forces them to continually try to lower their costs. One way of doing so is to reduce labor costs, by cutting wages, moving production to lower-wage regions, reducing benefits like health insurance and paid holidays, and the like. In response to worsening conditions, Marx posited, the proletariat will eventually organize around their common interests, as a class. Acting together as a class gives them the power they lacked as isolated individuals to overthrow capitalism. They are aided in doing so by their concentration together in factories, which facilitates communication and a sense of shared fate. The proletariat will first form labor unions, which attempt to merely reform capitalism, but will eventually wage a communist revolution that will overthrow the entire capitalist system, including the state which supports it. It would be replaced by a communist society in which economic and political life functioned to maximize the human potential of each person, rather than maximize profit for the few.

Marx introduced the importance of **ideology** in the class struggle. An ideology is a set of shared beliefs about how the social world works. Marx argued that in any society, the ruling class maintains its position not only by use of force, but by creating and spreading an ideology that justifies its dominance.

(For example, under a monarchy, the belief that kings and queens are divinely appointed justifies their power.) In capitalist systems, bourgeois ideology helps prevent a worker uprising by, for example, reinforcing the notion that individual talent and especially effort is the key to economic success, so those that do not succeed have no one to blame but themselves. This ideology suggests that the route to prosperity for workers is to compete against each other, not to band together to further their interests. The failure of workers to recognize their common interests is called **false consciousness**, and Marx surmised that overcoming this would be a major task for any revolutionary movement.



According to Marxist theory, labor movements are an inevitable consequence of capitalism. (Photo by Aurelio Jose Barrera.)

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) is another well-known thinker in the Marxist tradition. He is best remembered for his claim that **ideological hegemony** is the primary obstacle to revolution in modern capitalist states. (Hegemony means the power of one group over another.) The capitalist class maintains its power not only through force, but by



Antonio Gramsci

controlling a society's culture: education, mass media, religious institutions--and hence its notions of what is acceptable. The proletariat adopts an ideology that accepts existing power relations and makes it impossible to imagine a different society. Hence most people never question capitalist social arrangements (Gramsci 1929-1935).

The Marxist perspective on social movements has several strengths. One is the understanding that many modern-day social movements have emerged in response to the economic institution of capitalism. This is obvious in some cases, such as the labor movement, but other movements, such as the women's movement, can be usefully analyzed in class terms as well. Marx also astutely understood that social movements arise when both external factors (the growing weaknesses of capitalism) *and* internal factors (the organization of the proletariat into a class) are ripe (Flacks 2004). The primary shortcoming of Marxism is that it has difficulty explaining movements that are not based on material needs or whose constituents are not organized by social class--what social movement scholars refer to as **identity-based movements**. These include the gay and lesbian rights movement and the Christian Right, for example.

The U.S. Tradition

Marxist theory has always been less popular in the U.S. than in European countries, due in large part to the deeply entrenched anti-communism in the United States. In the U.S., communists were

politically persecuted at various points in history, and in academic circles Marxism was not seen as a legitimate topic of study until the 1960s. Instead, up until the 1960s the dominant paradigm in U.S. sociology was structural functionalism. According to this school of thought, society consists of interrelated parts that function together harmoniously in service of the whole. Social order is the normal state of affairs, and disruptions occur when one or more parts or society fails to function effectively. Social movements emerge because such disruptions or strains have an adverse psychological effect on individuals, which leads them to join social movements (see Table 1).

In the classical tradition, the study of social movements is subsumed in the **collective behavior theory**, which also includes phenomena like fads, fashions, riots, and panics. All involve groups of people acting outside of established institutions and are characteristically spontaneous and short-lived. The collective behavior school has not completely disappeared, as some sociologists continue to focus on the less organized aspects of social movements, for instance street demonstrations, instead of social movement organizations.

Given the structural functionalist paradigm that sees order as the normal state of affairs, it is not surprising that U.S. sociologists of the 1940s and 1950s tended to perceive social movements in largely negative terms. This was reinforced by their observations of the mass movements of Nazism in Germany, fascism in Italy and elsewhere, and Stalinism in the Soviet Union. According to Kornhauser's mass society theory (1959), macro-level processes like industrialization, urbanization, and bureaucratization create social changes that weaken traditional ties within families and communities. The resulting social isolation of individuals creates widespread *anomie*, or normlessness (Durkheim 1951). Collective actions, including social movements, serve as a substitute community that provides a social anchor. Mass society theory was seen as particularly useful in explaining the rise of fascist and communist movements in the 1930s.

The strength of collective behavior theory is its insight into the macro-social factors that contribute to the emergence of social movements. But since these early collective behavior theorists saw collective action as largely irrational, they paid little attention to how social movements actually develop and operate. It would be up to the next wave of researchers to develop a systematic analysis at the meso-level of how social movements organize themselves, recruit members, get their message out, develop strategies and tactics, and deal with opponents.

THE WATERSHED OF THE 1960S

The 1960s saw the largest outbreak of social movements that U.S. society has ever witnessed. Millions participated in the Civil Rights movement, the movement against the war in Vietnam, the student movement, the women's movement, and other movements that erupted from the late 1950s through the mid 1970s. This had several important consequences for how scholars thought about social movements. First, the existence of the movements themselves forced scholars to rethink their theories (and, of course, provided a wealth of new empirical data for them to analyze). Contrary to what classical theories would have predicted, the social movements of 1960s were relatively widespread and prolonged; movements were well organized and operated strategically; and participants were not marginalized members of society, but tended to be socially well adjusted and economically secure (Flacks 1971). Second, many

Table 1: A Comparison of Collective Behavior and Resource Mobilization Approaches to Social Movements

Collective Behavior Theories	Resource Mobilization Theories
Grievances, created by social structural strains, explain the emergence of social movements	Resources and the ability to mobilize them, and opportunities in the political structure, explain the emergence of social movements
Social movements are abnormal and rare	Social movements are normal, a part of the political process
Social movements are spontaneous and unorganized	Social movements are organized, and this organization is the key to mobilizing resources and hence to movement success
Movements are irrational	Movements are rational

sociologists who ---studied these new movements were, or had been, participants themselves. As such, they were more sympathetic to the movements than previous scholars: less likely to see them as irrational responses to social changes and more likely to focus on the organized, instrumental aspects of movements.

Resource Mobilization Theory

The result was a new paradigm, **resource mobilization theory**, which posits that the availability of resources and the ability to assemble and coordinate them for use—to *mobilize* them--influences the likelihood that a social movement will form and will succeed. A **resource** is something that can be potentially used by a movement to further its goals. We can divide resources into five main categories (Edwards and McCarthy 2004).

moral resources: expressions of approval and support—legitimacy, sympathy, and the like--that come from outside the movement. Celebrity endorsements of a movement’s cause are an example.

cultural resources: widely shared beliefs and practices. In the contemporary U.S., the high value placed on justice and equality are often used by movement activists to justify their cause.

social-organizational resources: existing groups and social networks that can provide access to additional resources. For example, movement activists often tap into church communities to recruit participants and disseminate information.

human resources: individuals' time, skills, expertise, and experience. If movement participants decide to engage in civil disobedience, for example, it is useful to recruit sympathetic lawyers who can navigate the judicial system should activists be arrested or jailed.

material resources: goods and services, like computers, equipment, transportation, an office, as well as money.

Clearly, none of these resources can aid a movement unless participants find a way to use them effectively. This requires some coordination and planning among activists—hence resource mobilization's focus on social movement organizations and on strategic decision making.

Resource mobilization theory makes the following assumptions (summarized in Table 1).

1. Movement actions are rational: they are intended to further the movement's goal. In this way, social movements are continuous with conventional forms of political action like forming interest groups, voting, and lobbying public officials.
2. Grievances are a constant in modern societies, because conflicts of interest between groups are built in to social institutions. Hence other factors must explain why movements emerge in particular times and places. Specifically, scholars argued, movements develop when resources are available for mobilization that increase the chances of success.
3. Organizations play a key role in mobilizing resources, and hence in social movement success or failure. Formal organization—established rules and procedures for working together—enables social movement participants to use their collective power to make change.
4. Movement outcomes are influenced by both internal factors (strategic choices, the ability to mobilize resources) and external factors (social control by opponents, support of third parties, etc.).

Political Process Theory

In addition to focusing on the role of resources, in the 1980s some U.S. sociologists began looking at the effect of the larger political environment on social movements. They argued that understanding the emergence, growth, and decline of social movements requires paying attention to external political realities. (Most political process theorists have investigated movements that target the state, but I use the term *political* here to refer to struggles over power more generally, for example within economic institutions as well as in the political realm.)

Political process theorists point out that movements tend to emerge when political changes create new opportunities. For example, the Russian and Chinese revolutions both occurred when state power had weakened after long involvement in wars (Garner 1996). Furthermore, the political environment can shape movement decisions concerning organization and strategy. When state repression is high, movements may be forced to operate clandestinely. When nonviolent tactics are repeatedly quelled by police or armies, movement participants may decide to take up arms. Finally, the political environment effects movement outcomes. The United Farm Workers were successful in forcing growers to sign union

contracts in the 1960s in part because of the existence of liberal organizations that were willing to support their efforts (Jenkins and Perrow 1977).

The major strength of political process theory is that it corrects for resource mobilization theory's lack of attention to the political environments within which social movements operate. It helps to explain **cycles of protest**—the tendency for different movements to emerge and decline simultaneously, as in the 1960s.

New Social Movements Theory

While American sociologists were developing the resource mobilization perspective in response, European social movements scholars were also busy at work modifying their theories based on the new movements of the 1960s. According to the classical Marxist framework, social movements are a response to the economic, political, and social conditions of capitalism. Participants are drawn from the working class, and movements pursue economic goals like higher wages. New social movement theorists argued that the movements of the 1960s and after—the environmental movement, the women's movement, the gay rights movement, and others—are instead responses to post-industrial society (Table 2). Phenomena like bureaucratization, the intrusion of the state into everyday life, and excessive reliance on science and technology prompt a resistance to these various forms of domination. Hence, the new movements are concerned less with material benefits than with quality of life. Participants tend to come from more privileged sectors of society, including many students and professionals. These new movements tend to distrust the representative democracies of modern societies, which leads them to experiment with new forms of organization like consciousness-raising groups and consensus decision making. Their tactics rely heavily on disruption and the use symbolism.

The major contribution of new social movements theory is its recognition that contemporary social movements are not necessarily formed around material interests; values and ideas are of central importance. And, the targets of contemporary movements are often sociocultural—for example, attitudes toward homosexuality, or respect for the natural environment.

THE 1990S AND BEYOND: CONSIDERATIONS OF CULTURE AND IDENTITY

In the most recent development of the study of social movements, scholars have begun paying attention to the importance of ideas and beliefs in social movements. First, they have investigated the role of culture, defined as shared beliefs, ideas, and practices. Movements interact with the larger cultural environment—they both influence it and are influenced by it. In addition, movement participants create their own internal cultures. A large part of this involves developing a **collective identity**, which is a shared sense of “we-ness” among individuals in a group, or a shared sense of the meaning and purpose of the group (Melucci 1989). Collective identities are expressed in a variety of ways, including symbols, rituals, clothing, actions, and verbal styles. A collective identity can promote participation in a social movement—for example, during the civil rights movement, being a student came to mean being an activist (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Within social movements, collective identities contribute to solidarity—a shared sense of commitment to the movement—and to sustaining movements during the years between

peaks of activity (Taylor 1989). Further, collective identities may influence the strategic choices that movements make (Polletta and Jasper 2001). For example, many church-based peace groups are committed to using nonviolent methods based on their religious beliefs.

Many scholars have turned their attention to how social movement activists construct their messages to appeal to some larger audience—a process called **framing** (Snow et al. 1986). This is discussed more extensively in chapter 4. Movement activists construct and promote frames that are meaningful to a target audience. Hence, for example, activists in various social movements in the U.S. frequently use terms like “rights” and “justice” to highlight the urgency of their cause.

The strength of the recent cultural studies of social movements is that they correct for the previous overemphasis on the rational elements of social movements. People do not join and remain in social movements simply as the result of a rational calculus. (Is this a good use of my time? What chance of success does this movement have?) More typically, their involvement is a result of emotions and feelings that are generated in interaction with others who share their ideas and beliefs. Similarly, social movement participants do not choose tactics, strategies, and forms of organization based only on what will be most effective, but also on what they feel comfortable doing and what fits with their beliefs.

The major weakness of studies of culture and identity in social movements is that they tend to downplay issues of power and material interests that underlie many social conflicts. For example, the

Table 2: A Comparison of Classical Marxist Theory and New Social Movement Theory

Classical Marxist Theory	New Social Movements Theory
Movements are a response to capitalism	Movements are a response to post-industrial society (the increasing rationalization of modern life)
Participants are from the working class; collective identity is based on economic interests	Participants are middle class; collective identity is based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, etc.
Movement goals are material; focus on economic redistribution	Movement goals are post-materialist; focus on quality-of-life issues
Movement organizations and actions are bureaucratically structured	Movements are decentralized
Movements operate in the political realm, using instrumental action	Movements also operate in the cultural realm, using symbolic action

white supremacist movement is easily understood as the outcome of beliefs about the racial superiority of whites. However, scholars have shown that the movement emerged in the 1970s when an economic recession threatened the jobs of many white working class people, who channeled their frustration into blaming racial minorities instead of blaming large corporations or government policies.