WHY SOCIAL MOVEMENTS OCCUR: THEORIES OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

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Abstract

In this study, the emergence of social movements is examined. To understand why social movements are born (and grow), we looked at the following theories that try to understand the origins of social movements: deprivation theory; resource mobilization theory; political process theory; structural strain theory; and new social movement theories. The paper also demonstrated how some of these theories can be used to explain some prominent social movements. Finally, the paper also discussed how social movements are intimately tied up with various forms of adult learning.

Key words: Social movements, deprivation theory, resource mobilization theory, political process theory, structural strain theory, new social movement theories

Introduction

What causes social movements to be born? Are the causes political or economic or cultural in nature? Over the last few decades academic researchers have pondered the reasons why various types of social movements are born and subsequently grow. They have come up with various theories to explain the birth, growth, and maturation of social movements in diverse parts of the planet. This paper takes a look at some of the major theories of social movements that have been proposed over the years and how these theories can explain the birth and growth (or lack thereof) of specific social movements. The paper also looks at how some of these theories fare in dealing with the Internet-era social movements, like the controversial anti-globalization movement. Finally, the paper also takes a look at how these theories bridge the gap between social movements and any form of adult learning that might occur as a result of participation in these movements.

1. Prominent Theories of Social Movements

Starting in the 1950s the US and Europe saw an explosion of protests and demonstrations against governments, government policies, and existing social practices (Phongpaichit, 1999). In the US alone, there were the Civil Rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, the feminist (and gender equality) movement, the "green" or environmental movement, etc. Europe also saw its versions of the feminist and environmental movements as well as the anti-colonial movement (as for example, the pro-Algerian Independence movement in France). With the occurrence of these social movements arose the question as to why social movements are born and grow. Social scientists, especially American and West European academic scholars, tried to develop theories to understand the origins of these movements and to predict the future course of these movements (Phongpaichit, 1999).

Some of these theories are as follows: deprivation (or relative deprivation) theory; resource mobilization theory; political process theory; structural strain theory; and new social movement theories. There have been actually many other theories that have been proposed to explain the birth and growth of social movements, but the above are usually regarded as

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among the more prominent amongst them. In the following section, I will take a more detailed look at each one of the above theories and how each one can be applied to understanding one particular social movement.

1.1. The Theories: A Detailed Look

What follows is a description of the main tenets of each one of the above-listed theories, their strengths and weaknesses, and how each theory can be applied to explain the birth and growth of a specific social movement.

1.1.1. Deprivation Theory

According to proponents of the deprivation theory, some social movements are born when certain people or certain groups of people in a society feel that they are deprived of a specific good, service, or resource (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1988; Opp, 1988). Within the deprivation theory camp, there were two branches: absolute deprivation and relative deprivation. The proponents of absolute deprivation treated these grievances of the affected group in isolation from that group's position in society. Proponents of relative deprivation, on the other hand, regarded a group to be in a disadvantageous position vis-à-vis some other group in that society (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1988).

The deprivation theory, seemingly, provides a powerful reason as to why some social movements may be born. However, it does have one major disadvantage that is difficult to explain away. It fails to explain why in some cases deprivation fails to ignite the birth of a social movement. This gives rise to the suspicion that while the existence of a deprivation may be a necessary condition for the birth of a social movement, it may not be a sufficient condition for the social movement to be born. In other words, for a social movement to be born, deprivation needs to be present along with other factors (that the deprivation theory overlooks) in order for a social movement to be born.

In spite of the above difficulty, it seems that the deprivation theory may provide a partial explanation as to why a social movement is born. For instance, one can argue that the feminist movement was born in the 1960s because prior to that time women were "deprived" by society of rights and opportunities (especially in terms of a career) that were only accorded to men.

In a similar manner, one can argue that the civil rights movement in the U.S. was born because before that movement non-white people were "deprived" of basic rights and privileges that their white counterparts enjoyed. Again, we must keep in mind that in the two above-mentioned situations, deprivation of basic rights and opportunities was one of the causes as to why those two movements were born -- we have to also look for other factors that acted in conjunction with deprivation to give birth to those two movements.

1.1.2. Resource Mobilization Theory

The resource mobilization theory invokes the importance of the availability of suitable resources in the birth of a social movement. This theory thus says that when some individuals in a society have certain grievances, they may be able to mobilize necessary resources to do something to alleviate those grievances. The term "resources" in this context refer to things like money, labor, social status, knowledge, support of the media and political elites, etc (Dobson, 2001; Foweraker, 1995; McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1988; Phongpaichit, 1999) . One of the great advantages of this theory is that it offers a convincing explanation as to why in some situations some grievances may give birth to a successful social movement, whereas in other situations the same types of grievances may not give birth to anything similar.

One of the major criticisms of this theory is that it has an extremely strong "materialist" orientation in that it gives primacy to the presence of appropriate resources (especially money) in explaining the birth of social movements. There are social movements that have been born even when resources (especially financial ones) were scarce.

This theory does provide a good explanation of why some social movements have been able to grow at an exponential rate, even in the presence of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. The civil rights movement in the U.S. is a classic example of this type. The leaders of that movement -- primarily Martin Luther King Jr. and his colleagues in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference -- were able to successfully elicit the support of thousands of supporters (including many sympathetic whites) in launching and propagating the movement. They were able to do that in spite of the fact that a majority of the white population at that time were strongly opposed to some of the fundamental objectives of the movement (ex. the ending of separate public facilities for whites and non-whites and the awarding of voting rights to blacks).

Starr (2000) discusses in detail how many "new" social movements (that are categorized by many under the umbrella term "antiglobalization movement") try to mobilize resources, primarily human resources, by appealing to grassroots organizers. These grassroots organizers first try to gather "manpower" in their local areas, then bring them together in mid-level regional gatherings, and finally organize protests (and even boycotts) at the national and international levels.

True to their name, such "new" social movements frequently utilize the Internet (email, bulletin boards, chat rooms, listservs, etc.) to carry out their mobilizing activities. Starr (2000) draws particular attention to the relative successes and international appeal of the environmental and the anti-WTO movements to the use of modern telecommunications technologies to bring people together (or mobilize them) across international boundaries and geographic barriers (like seas and oceans). All future work on the resource mobilization theory and how it applies to the "new" social movements of recent years will have to take into account the overwhelming presence and influence of modern technologies (the Internet, cell phones, etc.) on the process of "resource mobilization."

1.1.3. Political Process Theory

Political process theory treats social movements as a type of political movement in that the origins of a social movement are traced to the availability of political opportunities. More precisely, this theory looks at the social movement in question to that of the state – or the power of the government in charge. If the government's position is strongly entrenched and it also is prone to repressive behavior, then the chances are high that a social movement might fail. If, on the other hand, the government is weak or more tolerant of dissenting behaving, then the chances are high that any social movement that is born might have the opportunity to grow and flourish (Dobson, 2001; Foweraker, 1995; Phongpaichit, 1999; Tilly, 1978).

Few social movement theorists would have any problems with the political process theory emphasizing the importance of political conditions and attendant political opportunities (or lack thereof) in determining the chances of success for a nascent social movement. The primary criticism of this theory is that it focuses too much on political circumstances and ignores cultural factors that might be strong enough to mitigate the effect of the political factors.

Foweraker (1995) looks at several examples of social movements in Latin American countries and how the power of the state (or government) has affected the outcomes of those movements. One of the poignant examples is the case of Chile where pro-democracy movements were brutally dealt with by the oppressive U.S.-backed government of General Augusto Pinochet (who died very recently). Foweraker (1995) contrasts the fortunes of the pro-democracy movement in Chile with that of the Green (environmental) movement in many West European countries. Whereas in the Chile case, the ruthlessness of the state crushed the pro-democracy movements repeatedly, in West European countries the presence of friendly and cooperative national governments fuelled the growth of the Green movement to what it is today. These two contrasting cases are vivid examples of how the outcome of social movements is intimately tied to the nature of the governments (or political systems) that these movements have to contend with.

1.1.4. Structural Strain Theory

The structural strain theory was proposed by Smelser (1965). The theory advocates that any nascent social movement needs six factors to grow. These six factors are: people in a society experience some type of problem (deprivation); recognition by people of that society that this problem exists; an ideology purporting to be a solution for the problem develops and spreads its influence; an event or events transpire that convert this nascent movement into a bona fide social movement; the society (and its government) is open to change for the movement to be effective (if not, then the movement might die out); and mobilization of resources takes place as the movement develops further.

The structural strain theory can be used to understand the birth and growth of the U.S. civil rights movement. During the 1960s, there was increasing recognition amongst both blacks and some whites in the country that the-then current state of discriminatory racial affairs could not go on (especially in light of the fact that at that very moment the U.S. was portraying itself in the Cold War as the global champion of liberty and equality). Discontent, in the form of sporadic protests and boycotts, was spreading slowly. However, what truly ignited the civil rights movement was the unforgettable bus incident involving Rosa Parks. That incident was the catalyst that converted the incipient civil rights movement into a truly national phenomenon -- and it paved the way for the judicial-legal revolution that was to change the face of American society forever. It must be noted that the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations were both receptive to these changes and they did not try to repress the nascent movement as it was slowly growing.

Thus, the structural strain theory does provide an appropriate analytical framework that can help us understand the origins and subsequent growth of the U.S. civil rights movement.

1.1.5. New Social Movement Theories

The new social movement theories (the term "theory" is not appropriate because it is not one specific theory, but a smorgasbord of somewhat different theories) arose during the 1960s, primarily in several different West European countries. These theories arose as a reaction to the deficiencies of classical Marxist theories for analyzing collective action (Buechler, 1995; Welton, 1993). New social movement theories (NSMT) move away from the typical Marxist framework of analyzing collective action from a primarily economic perspective. Instead, these theories look to other motivators of collective action that are rooted in politics, ideology, and culture. In addition, NSMT focus on new definers of collective identity, like ethnicity, gender, and sexuality to understand the causal factors for collective action (Buechler, 1995). Traditional Marxism, of course, made socio-economic class as the primary definer of collective identity.

NSMT tend to be based on the philosophical works of Continental thinkers like Jurgen Habermas and Alain Touraine. These theorists try to generate theories that can explain the behavior of postmodern societies, where much of the workforce is educated, skilled, white-collar, and working in service industries (Phongpaichit, 1999). The fundamental struggle that workers in a postmodern society face have to do with maintaining a balance of life-work issues -- this is in direct contrast to workers in the "modern" society of yesteryears who faced problems pertaining to exploitation by the ruling classes.

NSMT, in addition, operate in an ideological context framed by issues pertaining to individual rights vis-à-vis the state's rights over its citizens. NSMT posit that this tussle between individual rights and state's rights occurs in a background of postmodern societal values that are grounded in a desire for community, self-actualization, and personal satisfaction (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1988).

To put in a nutshell, traditional social movement theories (many of which were grounded in Marxist ideology) focused on issues primarily related to exploitation of one societal class by another; on the other hand, NSMT focus on issues pertaining to life-work balance that pertain to individual citizens.

NSMT purport to explain the behavior of recent (post-1960s) societal movements like the women's rights movement, the environmental movement, and the anti-corporate, anti-globalization movement (Starr, 2000; Tilly, 2004).

One of the principal criticisms of NSMT is that it tends to downplay the conflicts between various socio-economic classes of society; however, even in a postmodern society, different socio-economic classes do exist and they do experience conflicts with one another. Another criticism is that NSMT tend to treat movements, like the women's rights movement, the environmental movement, and the anti-globalization movement, as belonging to the same type, even though these movements clearly are quite diverse types of social movements. Thus, pigeon-holing these diverse movements into one category may be an exercise in intellectual futility.

2. Social Movements and Adult Learning

The connection between social movements and any form of adult learning is a fascinating one. At a very rudimentary level, one can see that social movements can and may have some learning value in one of two ways: the direct learning that occurs when people participate in a social movement and the learning that takes place in people who are outside the social movement but who, nevertheless, are affected by witnessing the operating of the social movement. Both types of learning are important in that they can result in a transformation of the behavior of the people who make up the society. Social movements are thus, at the very least, influential in molding the way people (both participants and non-participants) interpret the world -- and which then might impel them to take action that may result in societal change (Dykstra & Law, 1994; Welton, 1993).

In a similar manner, Holford (1995) poignantly claims that knowledge and reality are significantly constructed (and influenced) by social movements -- and, as a consequence, adult education (and learning) is a key aspect of this whole process.

Participating in social movements as well as (merely) witnessing a social movement can produce different types of learning. For instance, actively participating in a social movement can lead to both experiential and transformative learning for the participant as he or she learns to critically look at assumptions, perspectives, and values that have (so far) colored his or her way of looking at various societal issues and the meaning of life, in general. Thus, at the very

least, participating or even just watching the operating of a social movement can raise a critical consciousness in the mind of a person regarding complex societal issues.

Conclusion

This paper looked at some of the more prominent theories that have been put forward in an attempt to understand why social movements are born (and grow). More specifically, we looked at the following theories that try to understand the origins of social movements: deprivation theory; resource mobilization theory; political process theory; structural strain theory; and new social movement theories.

The paper also demonstrated how some of these theories can be used to explain some prominent social movements. So, for instance the deprivation theory was used to explain the birth of the civil rights and the feminist movements in the U.S. The resource mobilization theory was used to show how modern electronic technologies (like the Internet and cell phones) have helped in the mobilization of human resources in the anti-WTO demonstrations that were organized in various cities around the world. Finally, the paper also discussed how social movements are intimately tied up with various forms of adult learning.

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