Part II

When and Why Do Social Movements Occur?

Introduction

The most frequently asked question about social movements is why they emerge when they do. Not only does this process come first in time for a movement, but it is also basic in a logical sense as well. Until a movement takes shape, there is not much else we can ask about it. Where we think a movement comes from will color the way we view its other aspects too: its goals, personnel, tactics, and outcomes. In general, theories of movement origins have focused either on the characteristics of participants or on conditions in the broader environment which the movement faces. Only in recent years have cultural approaches tried to link these two questions.

Theorists before the 1960s addressed the question of origins to the exclusion of almost all others, for they frequently saw movements as mistakes that were best avoided! For them, the urgent political issue was how to prevent them, and to do this you needed to know why they appeared. "Mass society" theorists, for instance, argued that social movements occurred when a society had lost other, "intermediary" organizations that discontented individuals could join (Kornhauser 1959). These might be trade unions, community groups, churches—or any other organization that could mediate between the individual and government, aggregating individual preferences and providing outlets for letting off steam. These "regular" organizations were thought to be stable and normal and healthy, unlike social movements. Other theorists emphasized the kind of people they thought likely to join movements, which would form when enough people were "alienated" from the world around them, or had infantile psychological needs that absorption in a movement might satisfy (Hoffer 1951). In general, early theorists saw movements as a function of discontent in a society, and they saw discontent as something unusual. Today, scholars see social movements as a normal part of politics, and so these early theories are no longer taken very seriously.

In the 1960s and 1970s, a group of researchers known as the "resource mobilization" school noticed that social movements usually consisted of formal organizations (McCarthy and Zald 1977, excerpted in part VI). And one prerequisite for any organization was a certain level of resources, especially money, to sustain it. They argued that there were always enough discontented people in society to fill a protest movement, but what varied over time—and so explained the emergence of movements—was the resources available to nourish it. They accordingly focused on how movement leaders raise funds, sometimes by appealing to elites, sometimes through direct-mail fundraising from thousands of regular citizens. As a society grows wealthier, moreover, citizens have more discretionary money to contribute to social movement organizations, and so there are more movements than ever before. With this point of view, the focus shifted decisively away from the kinds of individuals who might join a movement and toward the infrastructure necessary to sustain a movement. Today, scholars still consider resources an important part of any explanation of movement emergence.

The paradigm that has concentrated most on movement emergence is the "political process" approach (Jenkins and Perrow 1977; McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1998). In this view, economic and political shifts occur, usually independently of protestors' own efforts, that open up a space for the movement. Because they perceive movements as primarily political, making demands of the state and asking for changes in laws and policies, they see changes in the state as the most important opportunity a movement needs. Most often, this consists of a slackening in the repression that organizers are otherwise assumed to face, perhaps because political elites are divided (the movement may have found some allies within the government), or because political and economic elites have divergent interests. There may be a general crisis in the government, perhaps as a result of losing a foreign war, that distracts leaders (Skocpol 1979). In many versions, the same factors are seen as explaining the rise of the movement and its relative success (e.g., Kitschelt 1986).

Rhoda Blumberg's description of the preconditions of the American civil rights movement (taken from her book, *Civil Rights*) reflects the process perspective, although it adds a few other factors as well. The migration of African-Americans out of the rural South provided more resources and denser social ties, a church and organizational infrastructure through which money could be channeled to civil rights work, as well as an entirely new cultural outlook. These in turn allowed a greater degree of mobilization, especially through the NAACP, which in turn won inspiring legal victories (especially *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954). Resources, organization, the emotions of raised expectations, and a sense of new opportunities all encouraged the civil rights movement that grew rapidly beginning in 1955.

Alongside mobilization and process approaches, a number of scholars have emphasized the social networks through which people are mobilized into social movements. Although networks have been used primarily to explain *who* is recruited (as we will see in part III), the very existence of social ties among potential recruits is seen as a prerequisite for the emergence of a social movement. If most process theorists emphasize conditions in the external world (especially the state) that allow a movement to emerge, network theorists look at the structural conditions within the community or population of those who might be recruited. Those with "dense" ties, or pre-existing formal organizations, will find it easier to mobilize supporters, and build a movement.

Jo Freeman's article, "The Origins of the Women's Liberation Movement," was one of the first accounts of a movement to place networks front and center. She was arguing against early theorists who saw discontented and unorganized masses as spontaneously appearing in the streets. (Freeman herself was one of the founders of the younger branch of the movement in Chicago.) Freeman asserts that, if spontaneous uprisings exist at all, they remain small and local unless they have pre-existing organizations and social ties. Those networks are important for communication, vital to the spread of a movement. Like most network theorists, however, she does not discuss the emotions that are the real life blood of networks: people respond to the information they receive through networks because of affective ties to those in the network. She also admits that organizers can set about building a new network suited to their own purposes, an activity that takes longer than mobilizing or coopting an existing network.

John D'Emilio's account of the 1969 Stonewall rebellion in New York City and subsequent development of a militant gay and lesbian movement also emphasizes the critical importance of social networks. This apparently spontaneous eruption of gay militancy in fact marked the public emergence of a long-repressed, covert urban

subculture. D'Emilio points out that the movement was also able to draw upon pre-existing networks of activists in the radical movements then current among American youth. The "gay liberation" movement recruited from the ranks of both the New Left and the women's movement. It also borrowed its confrontational tactics from these movements. Many lesbians and gay men, D'Emilio notes, had already been radicalized and educated in the arts of protest by the feminist and antiwar movements.

These structural approaches redefined somewhat the central question of movement emergence. Scholars began to see movements as closely linked to one another, because leaders and participants shifted from one to the other, or shared social networks, or because the same political conditions encouraged many movements to form at the same time. So researchers began to ask what caused entire waves of social movements to emerge, rather than asking about the origins of single movements (Tarrow 1998:ch. 9). In this structural view, all movements are equivalent.

In the cultural approach that has arisen in recent years, not all movements are seen as structurally similar. In one version, movements are linked to broad historical developments, especially the shift from an industrial or manufacturing society to a postindustrial or knowledge society, in which fewer people process physical goods and more deal with symbols and other forms of knowledge (Touraine 1977). Social movements are seen as efforts to control the direction of social change largely by controlling a society's symbols and self-understandings. This often involves shaping or creating their own collective identities as social movements (Melucci 1996).

In cultural approaches, the goals and intentions of protestors are taken seriously. For instance, the origin of the animal protection movement has been linked to broad changes in sensibilities of the last 200 years that have allowed citizens of the industrial world to recognize the suffering of nonhuman species—and to worry about it (Jasper and Nelkin 1992). Such concerns would simply not have been possible in a society where most people worked on farms and used animals both as living tools (horses, dogs, dairy cows) and as raw materials (food, leather, etc.). The point is to observe or ask protestors themselves about their perceptions and desires and fantasies, without having a theory of history that predicts in advance what protestors will think and feel. Perceptions are crucial in this view.

From this perspective, Charles Kurzman's article, excerpted below, helped change the way scholars think about political opportunities. Process theorists had insisted that these were objective changes, independent of protestors' perceptions, but for the case of the Iranian Revolution, Kurzman shows that the perceptions matter more than some underlying "reality." A movement can sometimes succeed merely because it thinks it can. In other words, cultural perceptions can play as important a role as changes in state structure. Process theorists had apparently not tested their model in cases where perceptions and objective realities diverged. We are tempted to go even further than Kurzman does: the objective shifts in repression, elite alliances, and so on (the "opportunities" of process theorists) may only have an effect if they are perceived as such. In other words, perceptions, rhetoric, symbols, and emotions matter as much or more than structural shifts in the state.

Structural and cultural approaches disagree in part because they have examined different kinds of social movements (on the conflict between these two views, see Goodwin and Jasper 2003). Most process theorists have focused on movements of groups who have been systematically excluded from political power and legal rights—in other words groups who are demanding the full rights of citizenship. Cultural

approaches have been more likely to examine movements of those who already have the formal rights of citizens—who can vote, pressure legislators, run for office—but who nonetheless feel they must step outside normal political channels to have a greater impact (such as the so-called new social movements). In a related difference, structural theorists usually assume that groups of people know what they want already, and merely need an opportunity to go after it; culturalists recognize that in many cases people need to figure out what they want, often because organizers persuade them of it (e.g., that animals can suffer as much as humans, that marijuana is a danger to respectable society, that the U.S. government is the tool of Satan).

There are a number of factors to look for in explaining why a movement emerges when and where it does, drawn from all these perspectives: political factors such as divisions among elites, lessened repression from the police and army; economic conditions such as increased discretionary income, especially among those sympathetic to a movement's cause; organizational conditions such as social-network ties or formal organizations among aggrieved populations; demographic conditions such as the increased population density that comes with industrialization (if you live a mile from your nearest neighbor, it is hard to organize collectively); cultural factors such as moral intuitions or sensibilities that support the movement's cause. And in many cases, potential protestors must frame and understand many of these factors as opportunities before they can take advantage of them.

Culturalists have reasserted the importance of perceptions, ideas, emotions, and grievances, all of which mobilization and process theorists once thought did not matter or could simply be taken for granted. But these are examined today in the context of broader social and political changes, not in isolation from them. It is not as though people develop goals, then decide to go out and form movements to pursue them; there is an interaction between ideas, mobilization, and the broader environment. But some people hold ideas that others do not, so that the question of the origins of a social movement begins to overlap with that of who is recruited to it.

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways might the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954 have encouraged the civil rights movement? (Think about emotional dynamics as well as cognitive ones.)
2. What were the two branches of the women's movement of the late 1960s and how do they differ?
3. In what ways did the New Left and women's movement spur the development of the gay liberation movement?
4. Did the Iranian Revolution occur because people perceived opportunities for collective action that didn't actually exist?
5. What is the relationship between "objective" political opportunities and people's perceptions of them? What effect does each have?
6. What are the competing sets of factors that might explain popular participation in the Iranian Revolution of 1979? Which does Kurzman favor?

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2   The Civil Rights Movement

Rhoda Lois Blumberg

Trends and events in the first half of the twentieth century significantly affected black people and provided the necessary conditions for the successful take-off of the civil rights movement. Militant free and ex-slave black leaders had come forward prior to the Civil War; whites as well as blacks had struggled in the abolitionist movement. Yet by the end of the nineteenth century, the main spokesperson for the race was the accommodationist leader, Booker T. Washington, who espoused gradual change rather than political action.

Poverty, segregation, and violence were rampant when Washington came to prominence. Most former slaves had been deprived of their newly won right to vote and were still members of a rural peasantry in the South. Washington advised adjustment to the biracial situation and to disenfranchisement. He stressed self-help, racial solidarity, economic accumulation, and industrial education. His polite, conciliatory stance toward whites was coupled with the premise that black folk should take responsibility for their own advancement – to prove themselves worthy of the rights many thought they had already won.

Washington's 1895 speech at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta was hailed by whites. He gained the financial backing of foundations and controlled, through the "Tuskegee machine," important governmental appointments of black individuals during the Theodore Roosevelt and Taft administrations.

Protest had not entirely died out, however. The Afro-American Council, in existence from 1890 to 1908, had a militant outlook. Antilynching crusader Ida Wells-Barnet and William Monroe Trotter, editor of the outspoken *Boston Guardian*, lashed out against Washington. W. E. B. Du Bois gradually made public his growing disagreements with Washington, and through his role as editor of *Crisis* magazine, Du Bois renewed the move toward integration and equal rights. But until his death in 1915, and despite some erosion of his power, Booker T. Washington probably remained the most influential political figure of the race.

What happened to move a people from accommodation to protest? The most important interacting events that made the transition possible included:

1. A mass migration of black peasantry out of the South, eventuating in their transformation to a predominantly urban group
2. White violence against the black urban newcomers which demanded response
3. Two world wars and an economic depression
4. Years of litigation culminating in important legal victories
5. The development of community institutions and organizations in the cities
6. The rise of leaders who utilized opportunities for protest and were able to mobilize potential participants
7. A changed international climate confronting American racism

[...]

World War II stimulated another major migration to the North, so that by 1950 almost one-third of all black people lived outside the South. Over 20 million people, more than 4 million of them black, were forced to leave the land after 1940.