INFORMAL SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

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Summary

Social movements have become a key area of academic study in recent times. This preoccupation has emerged as a result of the changing dynamics of the political and cultural environment in which collective activity takes place. Globalization has contributed to the generation of transnational forms of collective action. Such activity has provided for the reshaping of established political entities such as states and, in some cases, the transformation of predominately closed political systems.

To the extent that the existence of social movements raises questions about the place of democratic politics in conditions of globalization they offer opportunities to develop theories of democracy divorced from reliance of state level analyses. In theory and in practice social movements provide a live example of the way in which democratic politics are being reshaped both within and beyond the state.

Social movements represent that sphere of activity often left behind by the state. They represent an arena of autonomous collective action free from the involvement of the state and thereby act as a weight against the overpowering and sometimes totalitarian implications of state interference in society. In an environment marked by an existing tension between the internationalization of states in some areas and the re-articulation of state power in others, social movements provide an alternative conceptualization of democratic politics free from the hegemonic tendencies of state power. As globalization becomes ever more the catchword of the twenty-first century, so the existence of social movements will continue to be driven by the emancipatory spirit of populations across the globe.

1. Introduction

Social movements have been and continue to be responsible for far-reaching transformations within and across societies. As sources for social and political transformation, social movements may be seen as expressions of latent norms and values held among large sections of the population. These norms and values may, for a number of reasons, fail to be articulated within established political institutions such as political parties. Social movements offer a context in which an evolving consciousness can be expressed in the absence of established organizational and institutional imperatives. The activities of social movements are often spontaneous, the movements loosely organized, and their ideologies open-ended. This article seeks to answer the following questions: What are social movements? What is their history? What impact do they or will they have in our 'global age'?

2. Defining Social Movements

The organizational and ideological nature of social movements makes them very difficult to define with any degree of clarity. Their diversity of scale, level of organization and relationships with political parties and other established organizations make it difficult to delineate the characteristics that mark a social movement out from other related phenomena. Social movements appear at a range of levels from neighborhood, to city to national and international levels drawing together individuals who share the same interests and identities. Loosely organized social movements differ from political parties that are tightly organized and are primarily national in their orientation. Political parties have specific programs which they seek to put into practice while social movements are broader seeking to influence, as well as being expressions of popular modes of activity and thought. Where social movements seek to influence the norms and values held in society at large, political parties contend for governmental power by presenting the populace with a specific set of proposals.

Social movements can be well understood with reference to the social environments or opportunity structures in which they operate. As will be shown later a particular kind of environment conducive to the flourishing of social movements is one that allows for the opening up of spaces in which democratic politics can be articulated autonomously. Even where social movements exist in relatively closed political systems they emerge often as harbingers of revolutionary change. Social movements operate in different contexts not only in western liberal democracies but also in those countries marked by more or less repressive state apparatuses. Consequently social movements may operate in a semi-legal or illegal way both in liberal democracies and in authoritarian regimes.

Certain features of modern democracy fail to take account of the various needs and demands of minorities. Discontented minorities exist in a number of democracies and articulate their demands in a number of ways. These minorities vent their frustration at institutionalized exclusion through recourse to supranational activity and through involvement in social movements. One of the key activities that a typical social movement engages in is civil disobedience. This is different from the kinds of activity usually undertaken by interest groups and more institutionalized non-governmental organizations. Non-governmental organizations tend to be outgrowths of social

movements rather than being differentiated from them. As such the kinds of activities which non-governmental organizations are involved with, such as peaceful demonstrations and lobbying Members of Parliament, are simply a small collection of activities which can be expected from a typical social movement.

Classic examples of social movements include the labor movement, feminist movement, environmentalist movement and the peace movement. These movements have used civil disobedience as one of a wide range of tools in their armory. What is common to all of these movements is the fact that many draw upon common traditions rooted in the Enlightenment. The liberal and socialist ideals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries contributed not only to the workers movements across Western Europe, but also to the formation of social movements from the 1960s to the present. Crucial to the flourishing of social movements is the national context in which they operate. The national contexts in which social movements operate may work either to expand or limit the field of possibilities for human emancipation.

This distinction became clear from the 1960s when the libertarian cultures predominating in Western Europe and North America was contrasted against the apparently 'closed' cultural and political environment of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. As such the 'official socialism' of many West European communist parties went through something of a crisis as more libertarian and critical strands of socialist thought gained currency among the worker and student movements in France, Italy and the United States. A particular kind of social, political and cultural environment conducive to the spread of social movements is thus also one that allows for the opening up of autonomous spaces for the articulation of democratic politics.

In many cases social movements feed off one another by drawing individuals together in 'communities of resistance' where ideas and strategies can be freely generated through democratic discourse. On occasions social movements may operate in a semi-clandestine way, as has been the case throughout a number of 'developing' countries. From the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa through to the various liberation movements in Central and South America such as the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, the role of social movements has often provided the institutional and normative structures which might replace the incumbent regime. When established institutions are unable to accommodate the demands of large sections of the population such movements act as the government in waiting. As such the role of the social movement may be very different in different circumstances.

This much was shown in the wave of protest that swept across a number of Central and Eastern European states between 1989 and 1991. Movements such as Solidarnosc, an amalgam of trade union and religious organizations, in Poland came to be a key rallying point for disaffected workers and contributed to the imposition of martial law in 1981. Ultimately, the success of Solidarnosc was achieved perhaps belatedly in the victory of the anti-Communist forces in 1989. Similarly in Romania a range of movements coalesced into the National Salvation Front through the latter part of 1989 to bring down the Ceaucescu regime. In each case the old and new political organizations sought to harness the social forces being unleashed by those historic events, each claiming to be the true representative of the changing mood of the times. But perhaps the most

important feature of the experiences of Eastern Europe was the fact that social movements flourished precisely in environments where alternative modes of popular discontent had failed.

Within a social movement there may be many separate organizations, and we may cite pressure groups as being part of this, but none is definitive of the movement itself. Social movements are expressions of latent feeling within and across different societies rather than simply being isolated spheres of political activity. They are, in essence, an expression of cultural and social values that are shared not only by sections of populations but between members of whole societies. These values are not delimited territorial constraints but may be shared across populations separated by great distances. First, the experience of migration, whether forced or voluntary, provides a context in which shared memories may be generated among members of 'diasporic communities'. Examples of movements of people in which latent feelings of loss and dispossession may be carried across states and whole continents include Jews, Armenians and Kurds. Second, the impact of environmental degradation may generate shared concerns by people across whole continents as has been shown in the example of those affected by the pumping of CFCs into the atmosphere or by the spillage of oil by grounded oil tankers. Together such movements indicate the transnational dimension which accompanies the rise of social movements in the twenty-first century. This transnationalization of social movements will be discussed in some more detail later.

Movements being fluid and flexible in terms of their organization and ideology may spawn political parties and other related organizations. Sometimes, as with the environmentalist movement, the creation of a political party may lead to the gaining of governmental influence. This has happened in a number of countries in Western Europe including France and Germany where green parties have participated in government. Despite this even green parties tend to seek a transformation in attitudes among the population rather than on winning power as such. The difficulty in joining a coalition government confronts the typical green party precisely when it must take responsibility for policies that go against certain key currents of thought prevalent in the movement. In Germany the bombing of Serbia in 1999 by NATO forces caused division within the Green Party (*die Grünen*) where they controlled the foreign ministry. As with any movement the participation of some of its members results in the alienation of some sections of the 'purist' wing and the green movement is no exception to this.

What, then, are the key characteristics of social movements?

A number of key points may be made in relation to social movements. First, a social movement may be seen as a context for the existence of an informal network of social actors. Social movements are characterized by their loose and dispersed links between individuals and groups of individuals. Such networks promote the circulation of essential resources for action such as information, expertise and material resources. Greenpeace is an example of just such an organization. While Greenpeace has a tightly knit organizational structure at its center, its global links are loose and weakly bonded organizationally. Because of its broadness both ideologically and organizationally, Greenpeace operates more as a social movement than a non-governmental organization.

While it is an outgrowth of the green movement its global orientation makes Greenpeace almost expressive of the green movement itself.

As sources of solidarity social movements play an important function in consolidating sections of a population around a common goal. Social movements provide the context in which new ideas and activities can be developed. Even where there is an absence of demonstrations and public activities social movements provide the context in which collective identities and lifestyles may be generated and maintained. The Gay and Lesbian movement is an example of the way in which a movement can provide for an ongoing support network for those who because of their sexuality do not fit into established social and cultural modes of activity.

Social movements are characterized by their emphasis on collective action and conflict. Social movements actors are engaged in activity which promote or oppose social change. Such action is based on conflict that the actors and their adversaries both see as important. Any action, if successful, should result in the damaging of interests held by the other actors. It is indeed, this oppositional quality that gives the movement its 'moving' force.

Finally, a key resource in the armory of social movements is their use of protest. Much of the research carried out on social movements has tended to emphasize the way in which they use unconventional modes of activity to articulate their demands. In particular it is primarily political movements that have used protest – especially violent acts – to push their demands.

Nevertheless even protest has come to be an established part of the repertoire of action undertaken by social movements. In a sense the very act of protest has itself become passé. As social movements mature they certainly use a variety of different strategies. Often activity may be limited to isolated and violent activities. As the movement matures so its repertoire of activity broadens. The kinds of activity pursued by social movements may thus be an indicator not only of their nature but also the phase of development that the movement has reached.

Some writers have argued that social movements exist precisely where there are oppositions in society that are in the process of being resolved. With the rise of the modern nation-state there has according to these writers a growing ability of society to develop critical behavior such that little is taken for granted as is often the case in 'traditional' societies. Social movements take advantage of this capacity of modernizing societies to 'act upon' themselves by seeking control over the nation-state.

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Biographical Sketch

Robert Grant is a researcher in globalization, democratic theory and indigenous rights. His specific interest is in the relationship between state and non-state actors and how non-state actors shape

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