Module 6  Social Protests and Social Movements

Lecture 31
Theories of Social Movements

A variety of theories have attempted to explain how social movements develop. Some of the better-known approaches are outlined below.

Deprivation Theory

*Deprivation theory* argues that social movements have their foundations among people who feel deprived of some good(s) or resource(s). According to this approach, individuals who are lacking some good, service, or comfort are more likely to organize a social movement to improve (or defend) their conditions (Morrison 1978).

There are two significant problems with this theory. First, since most people feel deprived at one level or another almost all the time, the theory has a hard time explaining why the groups that form social movements do when other people are also deprived. Second, the reasoning behind this theory is circular – often the only evidence for deprivation is the social movement.

If deprivation is claimed to be the cause but the only evidence for such is the movement, the reasoning is circular (Jenkins and Perrow 1977).

Mass-Society Theory

*Mass-Society theory* argues that social movements are made up of individuals in large societies who feel insignificant or socially detached. Social movements, according to this theory, provide a sense of empowerment and belonging that the movement members would otherwise not have (Kornhauser 1959). In fact, the key to joining the movement was having a friend or associate who was a member of the movement.

Structural-Strain Theory

*Structural-Strain theory* proposes six factors that encourage social movement development (Smelser 1962):

(a) structural conduciveness - people come to believe their society has problems
(b) structural strain - people experience deprivation
(c) growth and spread of a solution - a solution to the problems people are experiencing is proposed and spreads
(d) precipitating factors - discontent usually requires a catalyst (often a specific event) to turn it into a social movement
(e) lack of social control - the entity that is to be changed must be at least somewhat open to the change; if the social movement is quickly and powerfully repressed, it may never materialize
(f) mobilization - this is the actual organizing and active component of the movement; people do what needs to be done

This theory is also subject to circular reasoning as it incorporates, at least in part, deprivation theory and relies upon it, and social/structural strain for the underlying motivation of social movement activism. However, social movement activism is, like in the case of deprivation theory, often the only indication that there was strain or deprivation.

**Resource-Mobilization Theory**

*Resource-Mobilization theory* emphasizes the importance of resources in social movement development and success. Resources are understood here to include: knowledge, money, media, labor, solidarity, legitimacy, and internal and external support from power elite. The theory argues that social movements develop when individuals with grievances are able to mobilize sufficient resources to take action. The emphasis on resources offers an explanation why some discontented/deprived individuals are able to organize while others are not.

Some of the assumptions of the theory include:

- There will always be grounds for protest in modern, politically pluralistic societies because there is constant discontent (i.e., grievances or deprivation); this de-emphasizes the importance of these factors as it makes them ubiquitous
- Actors are rational; they weigh the costs and benefits from movement participation
- Members are recruited through networks; commitment is maintained by building a collective identity and continuing to nurture interpersonal relationships
- Movement organization is contingent upon the aggregation of resources
- Social movement organizations require resources and continuity of leadership
- Social movement entrepreneurs and protest organizations are the catalysts which transform collective discontent into social movements; social movement organizations form the *backbone* of social movements
- The form of the resources shapes the activities of the movement (e.g., access to a TV station will result in the extensive use of TV media)
Movements develop in contingent *opportunity structures* that influence their efforts to mobilize; as each movement's response to the opportunity structures depends on the movement's organization and resources, there is no clear pattern of movement development nor are specific movement techniques or methods universal.

Critics of this theory argue that there is too much of an emphasis on resources, especially financial resources. Some movements are effective without an influx of money and are more dependent upon the movement members for time and labor (e.g., the civil rights movement in the USA).

**Political Process Theory**

*Political process theory* is similar to resource mobilization in many regards, but tends to emphasize a different component of social structure that is important for social movement development: political opportunities. Political process theory argues that there are three vital components for movement formation: insurgent consciousness, organizational strength, and political opportunities.

Insurgent consciousness refers back to the ideas of deprivation and grievances. The idea is that certain members of society feel like they are being mistreated or that somehow the system is unjust. The insurgent consciousness is the collective sense of injustice that movement members (or potential movement members) feel and serves as the motivation for movement organization.

Organizational strength falls in line with resource-mobilization theory, arguing that in order for a social movement to organize it must have strong leadership and sufficient resources.

Political opportunity refers to the receptivity or vulnerability of the existing political system to challenge. This vulnerability can be the result of any of the following (or a combination thereof):

- Growth of political pluralism
- Decline in effectiveness of repression
- Elite disunity; the leading factions are internally fragmented
- A broadening of access to institutional participation in political processes
- Support of organized opposition by elites

One of the advantages of the political process theory is that it addresses the issue of timing or emergence of social movements. Some groups may have the insurgent consciousness and resources to mobilize, but because political opportunities are closed, they will not have any success. The theory, then, argues that all three of these components are important.
Critics of the political process theory and resource-mobilization theory point out that neither theory discusses movement culture to any great degree. This has presented culture theorists an opportunity to expound on the importance of culture.

One advance on the political process theory is the political mediation model, which outlines the way in which the political context facing movement actors intersects with the strategic choices that movements make. An additional strength of this model is that it can look at the outcomes of social movements not only in terms of success or failure but also in terms of consequences (whether intentional or unintentional, positive or negative) and in terms of collective benefits.

**Collective Behaviour / Collective Action Theories (1950s)**

Since most of the action taken by on or behalf of groups of individual is taken through organizations, it will be helpful to consider organization in a general or theoretical way. The logical place to begin any systematic study of organization is their purpose as some organization may fail to fulfill the interest of members and other may be enticed into serving only the ends of the leadership. But organizations perish if they fail to fulfill the interest of their members. These organizations are expected to further are for the most part common interests: the union member’s common interest in their higher wages, the farmers’ common interest in their legislation, stakeholders’ common interest in higher dividends and stock prices etc. Purely personal or individual interests can be advanced, and usually advanced most efficiently by individual, unorganized action. There is obviously no purpose in having an organization when individual, unorganized action will fulfill the purpose of individual rather than the organization and there would be no point in forming the organization simply to play solitaire. But when a number of individuals have collective action or collective interest than individual will not be able to advance their single interest. Therefore, an organization can perform when there are common goals through collective action.

**Relative Deprivation Theory (1960s)**

The doctrine of relative deprivation sustained by American scholars (Gurr 1970) has led some projects on agitation and mass movements. Relative deprivation is described as player’s recognition of inconsistency between their value desires and their environment’s manifest value potentialities. Value prospects are the goods and conditions of life to which people suppose they are fairly entitled. The determinants of value potentialities are to be appeared extensively in the social and physical surroundings; they are the stipulations that decide people’s known possibilities of obtaining or retaining the norms they justifiably desire to achieve. Gurr comments: “The frustration – aggression and the related treat – aggression mechanisms provide the basic motivational link between Relative Deprivation and the potential for collective violence.” Gurr also tie three other points to relative deprivation, namely dissonance, anomie and conflict. The second of the concepts anomie is significant in its effect to estimate opportunities. Those who observe deprivation and as a consequence realize an impression of disappointment become violent. They are ‘jealous’ of those who possess more. They protest or revolt against those who have more. They do not take measures to resolve the problem related to the sources of
deprivation. Gurr treats “deprivation” as primarily psychological; thus he does not handle the socio-economic framework, which is the origin of deprivation. If such sense of deprivation is confined to an individual against another individual it leads to crime. When it is transformed to collective transformation a deprivation of region, community or caste – it assumes the shape of collective activity. But it is not escorted with ideology for the social system; it lies to be a remonstration or agitation and rarely takes a form of social movement. Relative deprivation is an important but not an adequate factor for protest movements. M.S.A.Rao contends, ‘a sufficient level of understanding and reflection is required on the part of the participants, and the must be able to observe and perceive the contrast between the social and cultural conditions of the privileged and those of the deprived, and must realize that it is possible to do something about it.’

Relative deprivation theory has influenced the development of numerous fields in the social sciences including psychology, economics, and sociology. For example, the theory of relative deprivation has influenced psychological theory. In particular, relative deprivation theory is the foundation of multiple theories of social psychology including frustration-aggression theory, equity theory, social comparison theory, and reference group theory. The concept of relative deprivation and its measurement is used in the field of economics (Bossert and D’Ambrosio, 2007). Economics focuses on the measurement and quantification of relative deprivation using multiple summary indices of deprivation including the Gini coefficient, the maximum index, and the coefficient of variation (Chakravarty and Mukherjee, 1999). In the field of sociology, relative deprivation theory is used to explain the root causes of social movements and revolutions (Krahn and Harrison, 1992).

**Value-Added Theory (1960s)**

The value-added theory of collective behaviour determines whether or not collective behavior will occur. The theory argues that a specific combination of determinants facilitates and promotes collective outcomes and behaviors. The determinants of collective behavior form a value-added process. Value-added processes, which originated in the field of economic theory, refer to processes in which additional value is created at a particular stage of development or production. According to Knottnerus (1983), the value-added theory asserts that determinants to collective behavior combine according to a predictable pattern. Collective behavior requires the appearance of the determinants in a logical and predictable order; specifically, the theory asserts that six social conditions or “determinants are required for the development of a social movement: structural conduciveness, structural strain, generalized beliefs, precipitating factors, mobilization of participants, and social control”.

- Structured conduciveness refers to a social situation that permits or encourages some type of collective behaviour.
- Structural strain refers to a situation in which some type of deprivation exists.
- Growth and spread of a generalized belief refers to a belief that makes the situation meaningful to actors by identifying the possible source of strain, attributing characteristics to the source, and articulating possible responses to the strain.
Precipitating factors refers to an act that confirms a generalized belief or exaggerates the condition of strain.

Mobilization of participants for action refers to bringing the affected group into action.

Operation of social control refers to the counter-determinants that prevent, defect, or inhibit the accumulation of the previous determinants (Knottnerus, 1983, p. 390).

In the value-added theory of collective behavior, four components are said to account for social behavior: situational facilities, roles, norms, and values.

Situational facilities refer to the means and resources used to attain goads in an organization or role.

Roles refer to the expected behavior of a person in a social situation.

Norms refer to the rules governing the pursuit of goals.

Values refer to the goals or ends of social action.

These four components are ordered hierarchically. Value-added theory asserts that values, followed by norms, roles, and facilities, are the most important factor influencing social behavior and collective action. Values in this scheme are the foundation for social system integration and institutionalized action (Knottnerus 1983: 390). Value-added theory explains how grievances turn into generalized beliefs and then into social movements (Arthur 2005). Value added theory, also referred to as social strain theory, is part of a larger body of theory called strain theory. Strain refers to the cycle of inadequate regulation at the societal level that negatively impacts how the individual perceives his or her needs, means, and opportunities. Value-added theory of collective behavior argues that individuals join hostile and radical social movements because they experience social strain. Social movements develop to reassure members that action is being taken to address strain, grievances, and deprivation (Weeber & Rodeheaver, 2003). The value-added theory of collective behavior can be used to understand all variations in collective behavior. According to Lewis (1972), the determinants of collective behavior, structural conduciveness, structural strain, growth of a generalized hostile belief, mobilization of participants for action and operation of social control, take into account a vast range of scenarios that may result in collective behavior such as social movements. While value-added theory explains all types of collective behavior, value-added theory is particularly suited to analyzing and possibly predicting collective hostile outbursts. Hostile outbursts, a form of collective action often a precursor to social movement, refer to the act of mobilization for action under a hostile belief. The spread of hostile outbursts is understood in two main ways: Real and derived phases. The real phase of a collective hostile outburst forms in response to the accumulation of unfavorable conditions prior to the beginning of the hostile outburst. The derived phase of a collective hostile outburst includes divide between the hostility and the conditions that caused the outburst (Lewis, 1972).
Frame Analysis Theory (1960s)

Social movement framing theory attempts to understand the way in which social movements and social movement actors create and use meaning, or how events and ideas are framed. This meaning work has become a keyway in which social movements are understood and analyzed. Benford & Snow (2000) point out that “framing processes have come to be regarded, alongside resource mobilization and political opportunity processes, as a central dynamic in understanding the character and course of social movements” (p. 612). The idea of frame analysis comes from the work of Erving Goffman (1974). Goffman argued that people frame experiences in order to organize and understand the world around them. Much like a picture frame excludes things while focusing attention on others, so does framing. Framing helps people interpret the world based on their social position and their previous experiences. Every social interaction that occurs is understood through a frame of reference within which people react based on their perception of the situation and the way they perceive the people with whom they are interacting. In the study of social movements, collective action frames are used to bring people together and incite them to action. Benford and Snow (2000) explain, “Collective action frames are action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization (SMO)” (p. 614). A social movement organization is a formal group that functions as part of a broader social movement and that often provides the resources for the broader social movement. SMOs deploy collective action frames in order to create a set of meanings which will inspire people to act collectively towards some goal.

Social movement framing analysis focuses on four broad areas: (a) the creation and use of collective action frames, (b) framing processes, (c) opportunities and constraints, and (d) the effect of framing on movement outcomes and other processes (Benford and Snow 2000: 612-13). Within each of these broad areas there are sub-categories of analysis.

Collective Action Frames

Collective action frames are an important part of any social movement mobilization. As Gamson and Meyer (1996) explain, “collective action frames deny the immutability of some undesirable situation and the possibility of changing it through some form of collective action. They define people as potential agents of their own history” (p. 285). Collective action frames, then, define a situation as problematic, but also give people a sense that a problem is something that can be overcome through concerted efforts therefore leading to collective action. Collective action frames are understood as having three core framing tasks: diagnostic framing, prognostic framing and motivational framing (Benford and Snow 2000: 615).
Diagnostic Framing

Diagnostic framing refers to the identification of a problem. In order for any social movement to be successful to any degree a problem must be identified. If there is no perceived problem then it is difficult if not impossible to mobilize potential adherents. Framing theory, like Resource Mobilization theory, assumes that at any given moment there are enough grievances in the world to incite people to action. Unlike Resource Mobilization theory though, framing theory assumes that it is not solely about the SMO’s leaders’ ability to garner resources which contributes to growth and mobilization of social movements, but instead it is about their ability identify--or frame--problems correctly. As Jenness (1995) explains, “One way in which social conditions come to be seen as social problems is through the work of social movements” (p. 146). Jenness notes that the Gay/Lesbian Rights movement, like the Women’s Movement, successfully.

Theories of Social Movements framed violence against gays as a social problem, thus creating a powerful diagnostic frame for the movement to use. After having diagnosed the problem, the movement was able to move forward towards solutions. Many diagnostic frames include what has been referred to as an injustice frame. Injustice frames identify victims of some injustice and amplify the victimization (Benford & Snow, 2000). Injustice framing is more successful if there is a specific target -- someone or something that is responsible for the injustice and at which moral indignation can be directed (Gamson, 1995). On the other hand there is danger in focusing anger too narrowly on a specific thing or individual. As Gamson (1995) further explains, “As long as moral indignation is narrowly focused on human actors without regard to the broader structure in which they operate, injustice frames will be a poor tool for collective action, leading to ineffectiveness and frustration…”(p. 92). Injustice frames and diagnostic frames, then, cannot be the only way in which problems are framed. Frames must also include an analysis of the potential solutions to the problems that SMOs have identified. Prognostic framing provides this analysis.

Prognostic Framing

Prognostic framing “involves the articulation of a proposed solution to the problem, or at least a plan of attack, and the strategies for carrying out the plan” (Benford and Snow 2000: 616). Specific SMOs diagnosed problems and the proposed solutions seem to line up. This means that although there is a consistency in which an organization diagnoses a problem and the potential solution that they are advocating for. This is similar to a social movement repertoire in which plans of action are constrained by the ideology and/or habits of SMOs. Similarly, proposed solutions fall within a narrow range based on the habits and ideology of the movement (Benford and Snow, 2000). For example, the Gay/Lesbian Rights movement would not likely respond to violence against gays by calling for gays and lesbians to hide their sexual orientation, which could in theory limit potential violence. Instead, because of the ideology and goals of the organization they chose a strategy of documentation and empowerment in which they raised public awareness and attempted to gain legal support for their goals. Benford and Snow (2000) further note that prognostic framing also often attempts to refute or minimize the framing of social movement opponents.
This refutation is known as counter framing. Counter framing aims to prevent negative framings from taking hold and minimizing the impact of the movement. Of course, movements must do more than just identify problems and propose solutions; they must also mobilize people.

**Motivational Framing**

Motivational framing “provides a ‘call to arms’ or rationale for engaging in ameliorative collective action, including the construction of appropriate vocabularies of motive” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 617). Motivational frames, then, create reasons for people to get involved. They provide a sense of agency to potential actors. These types of frames are essential for social movements, as mobilization is a key and yet difficult task for social movements. Some of the vocabularies of motive that have been identified are:

- Severity, which refers to the perceived danger of the threat;
- Urgency, which refers to the swiftness in which the problem needs to be addressed;
- Efficacy, which refers to the sense of power one has to address the problem; and
- Propriety, which refers to one’s duty to act (Benford, 1993; Benford & Snow, 2000).

These vocabularies of motive can act in contradictory ways. As Benford and Snow explain, with regard to the anti-nuclear movement, “activists’ framings amplifying the severity and urgency of the nuclear threat contributed to a diminished sense of efficacy among the frame articulators”.

Social movement framing theory is a useful analytical tool. Sociologists can more easily understand how and why movements coalesce and mobilize by applying framing theory. Framing theory not only informs sociologists about the nature of movements, but it also helps to illuminate processes of popular consensus and popular support for different ideas and policies. Successful social movements often illustrate, shape and take advantage of popular sentiments. For example, the widespread mobilizations which took place in the 1960’s were illustrative of the desire for rights and empowerment. Social movement framing theory is also beneficial for movement activists. The better movement activists understand how to use the process of framing and how the construction of collective action frames works, the more empowered and successful they will be. Movement activists well versed in framing theory will understand the need for frames which diagnose problems, inform solutions and activate people.

**New Movement Theory**

New social movement theory argues that contemporary social movements are performing collective action in markedly different ways than traditional social movements. Sociologists use new social movement theory to analyze the role of new social movements in contemporary, post-industrial society. Understanding the history, applications, and strengths and weaknesses of new social movement theory is vital background for all those interested in the sociology of social movements and collective action.
The Main Principles of New Social Movement Theory

Sociologists use new social movement theory to explain the role of social movements in post-industrial societies. Social movements refer to a voluntary organization of individuals who act in concert to make or block changes. Social movements are power-oriented groups rather than participation-oriented movements, meaning that the group actions of social movements are not necessarily of primary benefit to individual members but instead serve the groups’ larger goals. Coordinated group actions are undertaken to make changes in the larger socio-political context. Social movements tend to be most successful in open, democratic societies in which social mobility and social change are accepted concepts. Norm-oriented social movements are more common than value-oriented social movements. Norm-oriented movements refer to groups that attempt changes within the system whereas value-oriented movements refer to groups that attempt to change the basic goals of a system (Morrison, 1971). New social movement theory refers to a new paradigm of social movement activity and collective action. Contemporary social movements are characterized by strategies, goals, and membership distinct from tradition social movements. New social movement theorists and scholars explain new social movements as arising from numerous channels in society. For example, new social movements are seen as expressions of civil society’s desire for structural change and arise from the growing importance and ubiquity of information in our increasingly knowledge-based society. New social movements are also seen as an inevitable outcome of changing social, economic, and political relationships in the post-industrial society. New social movements are movements for change based on the desire for structural reform rather than revolution, do not attempt to dismantle the existing political and economic systems and are characterized by their self-limiting radicalism. New social movement helps to explain the changing forms of political organization and the shifting relations between public and private spheres in post-industrial societies (Lentin, 1999). New social movement theory dominates current social movement research and allows for the study of macro external elements and micro internal elements (Fuchs, 2006). New social movements, which began to emerge in the 1950s, include social movements that arise from the conflicts in post-industrial revolution society and economy. New social movements are a loosely connected group of collective actions that have displaced the traditional social movement of proletarian revolution (Buechler, 1993).

New social movement theory argues that new social movements, such as anti-war, environmental, civil rights and feminist movements, are distinct from other traditional social movements such as labor movements. Traditional social movements tend to be engaged in class conflict while new social movements are engaged in political and social conflict. Traditional social movements tend to focus on economic concerns and inequalities. Members of new social movements are most often from a segment of society referred to as the new middle class. New social movement encourage-age members to engage in lifestyle changes, tend to have supporters rather than members and are characterized as loosely organized networks. These movements differ from protest groups or movements as they often desire to see change on a global scale as opposed to the single issues taken on by protest groups.
Culture Theory

*Culture theory* builds upon both the political process and resource-mobilization theories but extends them in two ways. First, it emphasizes the importance of movement culture. Second, it attempts to address the *free-rider problem*.

Both resource-mobilization theory and political process theory include a sense of injustice in their approaches. *Culture theory* brings this sense of injustice to the forefront of movement creation by arguing that, in order for social movements to successfully mobilize individuals, they must develop an *injustice frame*. An injustice frame is a collection of ideas and symbols that illustrate both how significant the problem is as well as what the movement can do to alleviate it.

In emphasizing the injustice frame, culture theory also addresses the free-rider problem. The free-rider problem refers to the idea that people will not be motivated to participate in a social movement that will use up their personal resources (e.g., time, money, etc.) if they can still receive the benefits without participating. In other words, if person X knows that movement Y is working to improve environmental conditions in his neighbourhood, he is presented with a choice: join or not join the movement. If he believes the movement will succeed without him, he can avoid participation in the movement, save his resources, and still reap the benefits – this is *free-riding*. A significant problem for social movement theory has been to explain why people join movements if they believe the movement can/will succeed without their contribution. *Culture theory* argues that, in conjunction with social networks being an important contact tool, the injustice frame will provide the motivation for people to contribute to the movement.

References


**Questions**

1. What is deprivation theory? How is it different from relative deprivation theory?
2. What is mass-society theory of social movements?
3. What is structural-strain theory of social movements?
4. What is resource-mobilization theory of social movements?
5. What is political process theory of social movements?
6. What do you mean by collective action?
7. What is value-added theory of social movements?
8. Discuss diagnostic framing, prognostic framing and motivational framing in the context of social movements.
9. Elucidate the principles of new social movement theory.
10. What is culture theory of social movements?