SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY

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Summary

Social movement theory is considered both from the perspective of those who wish to understand social movements and activists who wish to use theory to enhance the effectiveness of social movement mobilizations. Arguments that theory-guided organisation is indispensable to effective action are set against others that suggest that organization is too burdensome for the poor. The roles of the mobilization of resources, the opportunities and constraints inscribed in political institutional arrangements, and of knowledge and intellectuals are considered in turn. In conclusion, it is argued that tensions between theorists and activists are inescapable, and that theory is most likely to serve the interests of social movements if theorists are left to develop understanding of social movements rather than belaboured to produce theory that is of immediate practical use to activists.

1. Introduction

Activists sometimes argue that sociological theories of social movements are mere academic parasitism and that what is needed, if theory is needed at all, is theory *for* social movements, theory fashioned by people committed to social movements and designed to be useful to movement activists rather than to further the careers of theorists. There is, however, no inherent conflict between an interest in understanding the world and a determination to change it; it is merely that whereas theory may be

comfortably remote from action, action that is not informed by theoretical understanding will often be counterproductive. The problem for the activist is to decide which of the variety of available theories is most likely to sustain effective action. The type of theory that has given theory a bad name with activists is, in general, theory that is as unhelpful to social scientific understanding as it is to action. But there are other theories, other *kinds* of theory, which are more useful on both counts.

2. Is Theory Necessary?

Theorists tend, understandably, to believe in the utility of theory. They are, for the most part, true children of the Enlightenment: they believe in Reason and, believing in Reason, they believe that theoretical knowledge is the precondition of effective action to achieve desired results. Accordingly, theory has generally been the justification of formal political organisation.

Activists have usually been impatient with theory and suspicious of theorists. Explicitly or implicitly, theorists lay claim to power on the basis of their superior command of theoretical knowledge, knowledge they have often themselves created. Not surprisingly, activists often suspect that theorists have created theoretical knowledge partly or wholly in order to bolster their own claims to power. In any event, the effect of giving prominence to theory is to give power to theorists and to others with intellectual skills necessary to the interpretation of theory. At the very least, a movement that gives a high priority to theory is almost bound to be stratified between the highly educated few and the less well educated many. If the theory which guides the movement is elaborate and complex, movement organisations are likely to be formal, hierarchical and bureaucratic simply in order systematically to inhibit error, error, that is, in the form of action inconsistent with theoretical prescription. The Communist movement is a case in point: its bureaucratism stemmed, ultimately, from the centrality to the movement of an elaborate, formal theory – Marxism-Leninism.

But does such formal organisation best serve the interests of those whose lives the movement exists to change? Some recent work on social movements in the United States suggests that it does not. Indeed it has been suggested that those people who have most need of political action to alleviate their condition and least likelihood of achieving results by conventional political means are also ill-served by formally organised political movements. Thus Piven and Cloward concluded, on the basis of their study of poor people's movements in the United States, that, for the poorest sections of the population, the costs of formal organisation were insupportably high. Where poor people's movements *were* formally organised, all available energy and resources tended to be channelled into sustaining the organisation rather than into the effective pursuit of its ostensible objectives. Poor people appeared to achieve most where they took the less predictable path of spontaneous protest and riot rather than the more calculated one of a campaign. (This finding is consistent with Gamson's conclusion that, even among formally organised protest movements in the United States, it was the most unruly which were the most successful. It should, however, be noted that others who have examined Gamson's data have come to rather different conclusions.)

Piven and Cloward drew from their findings the implication that poor people would do better to avoid organisation (and the intellectuals and theorists who promote and often staff movement organisations) and to rely upon their own powers of spontaneous and sporadic protest. That way the poor would be spared the burdens of futile attempts to organise themselves or to be organised, they would avoid the dangers of being dominated by theorists, and they might yet achieve by spontaneous protest whatever they were ever destined to gain.

3. Theory, Action and Structure

The argument is similar to the 'structural' theory of revolution popularised by Theda Skocpol. Skocpol argued, on the basis of a comparative study of the French, Russian and Chinese revolutions, that revolutions are not made by revolutionary theorists or by dedicated bands of revolutionaries, but rather they are the outcomes of complex interactions between social and political structural conditions. In Wendell Phillip's words 'Revolutions are not made; they come'. Other students of modern revolutions have, however, come to rather different conclusions: Some, without denying the importance of structural conditions to the creation of revolutionary situations, quite reasonably insist that successful twentieth century revolutions cannot be understood except as complex performances by imaginative and committed actors. Just possibly, revolutionary actions may create revolutionary situations out of unpromising structural conditions; more certainly, structural conditions may provide revolutionary opportunities that go begging for want of suitably talented and energetic actors. Moreover, each successful revolution changes the political repertoire available to all revolutionaries who come after it. In sum, the record of the twentieth century tends to confirm the Leninist theory of revolution as a triumph of political will and organisation rather than the Marxist one which sees revolutions as the dark deliveries of historical necessity and social structural conditions.

It must, therefore, be doubted whether it is safe to generalise from Piven and Cloward's conclusions about the experience of poor people's movements in the United States. It needs to be remembered that their study covered a limited period of history in just one country. At the very least it must be considered whether the pattern they found is a product of the peculiarities of United States political culture. Castells's account of urban protests in Paris came to the contrary conclusion that unruly protests were unsuccessful and that the most orderly were the most productive of desired results. (It must be said that the more obvious reason for the lack of success of unruly protests in Paris – indeed, for the recourse to unruly protest at all – was the social profile of the protesters: the most unruly and least successful were the socially marginal immigrants, students and single people. More 'respectable' and better socially integrated people were more restrained (perhaps because they were more constrained?) and more successful. It should, however, be noted that no urban protests in Paris were more than very modestly successful; the structure of government and the attitudes of officials – dimensions of the political institutions and culture of a country – appear to be important factors in determining the success or otherwise of protest movements.)

The decentralised political system of the United States provides many openings for political access but imposes severe institutionalised limitations on effective policy

implementation. This, together with a political culture dominated by the ideology of democratic pluralism, generates grievances, legitimises their expression, and relatively easily (if incompletely and often ineffectively) accedes to protestors' demands. Strongly centralised states with fewer points of access and more effective mechanisms of policy implementation may be more resistant to disorderly protests but more hospitable to more institutionalised forms of participation by the poor. Certainly, Western European countries have generally been more accommodative to trade union organisation and have presented fewer obstacles to voter registration or voting itself than have many of the States in the USA. The costs of political organisation to the poor in relation to the benefits derived from it have, as a result, generally been lower in Western Europe and Australasia than they have in the United States.

4. The Changing Conditions of Success

It would, however, be wrong to imagine that such patterns are permanently fixed. States change and political climates change more often and more abruptly. What was true of a country in one year or decade may be much less true in another. Indeed, there is abundant evidence that it is the political will of the authorities, a factor much more temporally variable than a country's political institutional structure or political culture, that is the key factor in determining the success or otherwise of mass protests: the United States which, during the Democratic administrations of the 1960s, had been relatively responsive even to violent protests, became, in the later years of Nixon's presidency, altogether more resistant; in Spain protests were rigorously repressed in the 1950s and 1960s but, by the mid 1970s, were tolerated, chiefly because modernising technocrats were progressively displacing hard-line Phalangists in government; in central and eastern Europe, protest movements scarcely imaginable at the beginning of the 1980s were by the end of the decade transforming political culture and promising the transformation of political institutions.

A strategy effective in one place and at one time may be relatively ineffective or even counterproductive in another place or at another time. This should encourage us to be cautious in any generalisations about the utility for social movements of violence, of formal organisation or, indeed, of theory.

5. The Usefulness of Theory

Nevertheless it is rather more than mere rationalist superstition to believe that appropriately reflective, calculated action, based on sound knowledge of the situation and an appreciation of the likely consequences of possible alternative forms of action, will, other things being equal, usually produce better results than action which is entirely unreflective. On balance, it is most likely that the costs of action will be minimised and the benefits maximised if action is strategic. Strategy, of course, is necessarily based on knowledge and all knowledge is rooted in and laden with theory. It follows that theory may be useful to movements and not merely to their more personally ambitious members.

Activists who imagine that the action they take is entirely spontaneous and therefore safe from the corrupting influence of theory and theorists delude themselves. The social

scientific study of riots has amply demonstrated that even in the most anarchic protest there are 'leaders' who retain a consciousness of themselves apart from the action and who are, for that reason, capable of calculating and 'directing' action. These 'leaders' who may well be 'leaders' in only a single protest event, as well as the 'opinion leaders' who mould opinion in all kinds of communities, operate on the basis of understandings of the situation that depend upon knowledge which is itself shaped by theory. That theory may be – indeed, usually is – inchoate: it is not usually formalised as theory, but theory it is nonetheless. A major purpose of the social theorist is to make explicit and to subject to critical scrutiny theories that are otherwise unreflective and unreflected upon. Such theories may be powerful but they may also contain unconsidered contradictions and inconsistencies which, when acted upon, may ultimately have consequences quite different from those which were desired and intended. Much apparently pathological political action is in fact the product of pathologies of theory. The exposure of such pathologies is, accordingly, a useful service which social scientific analysis might render to social movements.

Glossary

Activists:	A proponent or practitioner of active political behaviour
Intellectuals:	Persons who use intelligence (thought and reason) and critical or analytical thinking, either in a professional or a personal capacity, and are considered important in providing leadership for social movements.
Knowledge:	Stocks of ideas allowing understanding, especially in relation to social structures.
Political Opportunity Structures:	A theory of social movements that argues that social movements are vastly affected by outside political opportunities.
Resource Mobilisation:	A theory which stresses the ability of a movement's members to acquire resources and to mobilize people towards the furtherance of their goals - in contrast to the traditional collective behaviour paradigm that views social movements as deviant aberrations, resource mobilization views social movements as formed by rational social institutions and social actors taking political action.
Revolutions:	Drastic and far-reaching changes in social structures (e.g. "the industrial revolution") or the overthrow of a government by those who are governed, sometimes accompanied by major institutional change (e.g. The french revolution).
Social Movements:	Social movements are a type of group action in which large informal groupings of individuals and/or organizations focused on specific political or social issues carry out, resist or undo a social change.

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Biographical Sketch

Christopher Rootes is Professor of Environmental Politics and Political Sociology and Director of the Centre for the Study of Social and Political Movements at the University of Kent, Canterbury, England. His recent research, mostly funded by the European Commission, has been on environmental protest, movements and NGOs, the global justice movement, and public contention over waste management facilities. He is Editor in Chief and Chair of the Editorial Board of the journal *Environmental Politics*, a member of the editorial boards of *Mobilization* and *Social Movement Studies*, and was convenor of the ECPR Standing Group on Green Politics (1997-2007).

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