Hilary Term, 2021

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND COLLECTIVE PROTEST

Dr Michael Biggs

Monday, 10.30–12.30, MS Teams

This paper examines explanations for the origins and outcomes of social movements and collective protest. Readings range widely in subject matter—from the anti-slavery movement in the eighteenth century to protest following the fall of Mubarak in Egypt—but with an emphasis on the United States since 1950. The emphasis is on preparing students to develop their own empirical research, for the MSc dissertation or DPhil thesis.

Requirements for students auditing the paper as well as those enrolled:

• For two of the weeks you will write an essay (about 2000 words) answering one of the questions. You are welcome to propose another question, just discuss it with me first. The essay should refer to all the relevant assigned readings plus at least two further articles or one further book published since 2010. Sharing your essays will help with revisions for the examination. Email me the essay before 5pm on Sunday. Late essays will not receive comments.

The paper is assessed by a three-hour examination in Trinity Term.

READING LIST († to be circulated)
Version with links to library catalogue: https://tinyurl.com/y44vcv8a

General
Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, Contentious Politics, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, 2015
James M. Jasper, Protest: A Cultural Introduction to Social Movements, Polity, 2014

I. Civil Rights movement
Thinking about any social phenomenon is most fruitful when it starts from familiarity with specific examples. As a case study, we will consider the Civil Rights movement in the United States, focusing on sit-in protest in the early 1960s.

• Why did mass protest for Civil Rights emerge in the early 1960s?
• How different was the Civil Rights movement of the early 1960s from the Black Lives Matter movement of the late 2010s?

2. Conceptualizing movements and protest

With a tangible example in mind, we turn to the question of how to conceptualize social movements and protest. Movements need to be grasped as an abstract social phenomena, and also one with a particular historical genealogy. Theory has been informed by the method of cataloguing protest events or ‘contentious gatherings’.

- Riots, demonstrations, strikes, occupations, boycotts—do these forms of action share similarities? How do they differ from voting?
- What explains the origin of the modern social movement?
- What is distinctive about the modern repertoire of protest and when did it arise?

Charles Tilly, *Contentious Performances*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, chs 1, 2, 5


3. Class bases

In contemporary democracies, social movements draw disproportionately from people with university education. Put crudely, protesters are privileged rather than disadvantaged. How can this association be explained? Relevant studies use survey evidence, which enables us to consider the strengths and weaknesses of this source of evidence. It is crucial to recognize that the association with privileged class position is not historically invariant; after all, the labour movement was paramount for most of the twentieth century. We also need to consider collective action by the most marginalized, which often takes the form of rioting.

- Why are university students and graduates so prone to protest?
- Can we distinguish between the conditions that provoke riots and those that stimulate social movements?
- What sort of people are most likely to participate in protest, and why?


4. Social networks

One primary reason for people to participate in movements or protest is the fact that others in their social network have done so. Movements also create new social networks.

- What configurations of social network are most conducive for participation in social movements?
- To what extent does the diffusion of collective protest or of movement organization depend on social networks?
- Does the prevalence of online social networks help or hinder mobilization today, compared to the pre-internet era?


5. Political linkages

Social movements are intimately connected to the political system. Political opportunities can help to explain increasing mobilization in some cases, but by no means all. The boundary between movements and conventional politics is sometimes permeable, with bureaucrats and politicians promoting the cause from within the system.

- ‘If movement emergence is explained by political opportunities, it becomes impossible to account for many cases where movements fail—because in those cases the opportunities turned out to be nonexistent.’ Do you agree?
- Can social movements create their own political opportunities?
- What political circumstances are most conducive to a social movement’s success?


6. Protest volatility

Protest is one of the most volatile social phenomena; periods of quiescence are punctuated by waves. With hindsight, sociologists can always find exogenous changes to ‘explain’ the eruption of protest, but they never predict them in advance! Volatility may be explained by the fact that participation in collective action depends on the actions of others, and so protest is subject to positive feedback.

- ‘The threshold model is useless because it cannot be empirically tested.’ Do you agree?
- Why does protest tend to cluster in time, so that periods of quiescence are punctuated by large waves?
- How helpful is the concept of diffusion in explaining the dynamics of protest?


7. Movement organization

Social movements must be sustained by organization. Formal bureaucratic organization is prone to oligarchy and can divert attention away from the movement’s goals to the organizational maintenance. Conversely, however, groups that eschew formal organization do not necessarily give all participants an equal voice.

- How does the organizational structure of a social movement influence the kinds of actions it undertakes?
- Does democracy within a social movement organization help or hinder its political effectiveness?
- Why do some movement organizations avow nonviolence while others embrace physical violence?


8. Evaluating outcomes

We like to think that social movements can be transformative, but robust evidence for this is surprisingly scarce. The challenge is to isolate the effect of protest and mobilization from the effect of other social changes that facilitate protest and mobilization. Devil’s advocates need to be taken seriously.

- Why do some movements succeed while others fail?
- ‘The achievements of any movement depend largely on the reaction of the state rather than the movement’s own strategies.’ Discuss.
- ‘In a democracy, politicians respond to the central tendency of public opinion rather than a small minority of activists.’ Do you agree?


