Social Movements

Dr. Jai Kumar Saroha
Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, S.D. (PG) College, Ghaziabad, U.P, INDIA

ABSTRACT

The study views the society in which social conflicts are seen as an integral part of the social structure. Movements also allow for a further democratization of society, enabling grassroots activism, and they are instrumental in bringing new topics onto the political agenda. This theory highlighted the role of resources and cultural and political conditions for the success of social movement organizations.

Keywords-- Organizations, Sociology, Political system

I. INTRODUCTION

Social movements can be conceptualized as sustained and enduring challenges to political decision makers in order to achieve some form of social change. Although social movements most often are composed of one or various social movement organizations, various authors have emphasized that social movements should not be identified solely with those organizations. Individual actions, cultural manifestations, the activity of opinion leaders and other elements of cultural change, and consciousness-raising can also be labeled as elements of social movements. Although social movements are studied mostly within the field of sociology, they are also of crucial importance within political science. It can be argued that some of the most important political changes in the 19th and 20th centuries were brought about by the actions of social movements. Powerful examples are the civil rights movements in the United States, the green movement, and women’s organizations, but one could also think about organizations aimed at promoting gay rights or the protest against authoritarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1980s. Social movements therefore are usually identified with contentious politics: They try to bring about political change by challenging the political elite. As such, they give voice to those who have been excluded from the political system.

II. DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT STUDIES

A. Early Approaches

In the early 20th century, social movements were mostly studied as a form of collective behavior, and this line of research was heavily influenced by the insights of crowd psychology. It was feared that individuals would lose their rationality once they participated in crowds because they would give in to a propensity to follow crowd leaders. Collective behavior could easily lead to mass gatherings, mobs, riots, and even forms of collective violence. This kind of crowd behavior was considered a potential threat to the stability of the political system. This negative conception of social movements can be explained by two distinct elements. On one hand, it should be remembered that this era indeed witnessed a number of unruly forms of participation, leading to political violence, attacks, and other forms of social disruption. On the other hand, it was also clear that sociologists and political scientists apparently identified with the current political and social order, seeing attempts to change the structure of society as a threat to political stability. In other scientific disciplines, too, an elite distrust of mass behavior was quite clearly present during this period. This conservative outlook was especially present in the seminal work of the French social psychologist Gustave Le Bon (1841–1931). In his work published in English under the title The Crowd (1895/1977), Le Bon stated that participants in mass gatherings displayed a tendency to behave in a herd-like manner, blindly following their leaders. The stability of society was ensured by a rational elite that was able to oppose the claims of unruly mobs.

The civil rights movement and the student uprisings of the 1960s, however, clearly forced political scientists to reconsider their view on social movements in a more profound manner as it became clear that these movements did not recruit just alienated members of society, and it became equally clear that these social movements would have profound political and social
consequences. For the first time, academics themselves started to participate actively in these kinds of movements.

B. Resources

A first and crucial innovation was the introduction of the resource mobilization theory by sociologists John McCarthy and Mayer Zald (1977). They argued that social movements are not just a spontaneous reaction to grievances and forms of discontent. Like all other forms of collective behavior, social movements are also dependent on a supply of material resources, such as time, money, preexisting organizational structures, or organizational skills. This way of looking at social movements was heavily dependent on rational choice approaches to human behavior. The underlying idea was that participants in social movements do not take part just out of some frustration or discontent but that they will embark on participation only if they arrive at the conclusion that this investment (in time or energy or risk-taking behavior) can be considered worthwhile or will lead to some form of social or political change. If organizational resources are not present at all, it does not make much sense to take part in contentious behavior. During the 1970s and 1980s, this resource mobilization theory was very influential in the study of social movements as it allowed scholars to investigate movements as a rational form of collective action. It also provided them with a checklist of items that were considered essential for the occurrence of forms of collective action. Organizational structures, means of communication, and preexisting recruitment networks were all considered necessary to mount a successful social movement organization. Critics, however, argued that this approach neglected the specific character of social movements, as the same rational approach could be applied to any form of political behavior. They also argued that various movements succeeded in bringing about social and political change in the absence of material resources.

New social movements focus on issues related to human rights, rather than on materialistic concerns, such as economic development.

- Evaluate the significance of new social movements (NSMs), which are more concerned with social and cultural issues, and the implications NSMs have on modern-day society
- New social movements (NSMs) are described by a theory regarding social movements which posits that the advent of the post-industrial economy resulted in a new wave of social movements distinct from those social movements arising during the industrial economy.
- In these new social movements, more importance is attached to social and cultural concerns, rather than economic or political considerations.
- Actors in NSMs are from a new middle class, instead of from the lower classes, as was typical of social movements of the industrial economy.
- NSMs consist of informal, loosely organized social networks of supporters rather than members and tend to be locally-based.
- NSMs act as a platform for collective action in civil society or in the cultural domain, rather than as an instrumental tool for the state. As such, new movements are often considered to be anti-authoritarian.
- NSMs are normally centered on a single issue, or a limited range of issues which are related to a broader theme, such as the environment.
- Political Opportunities

One of the crucial questions in the comparative study of social movements is why these movements are successful in some countries and not in others, given the fact that grievances can be considered as universal. A seminal study by Doug McAdam (1982) started from the observation that the American civil rights movement started in the 1950s, at a moment when racial discrimination in American society actually started to decline. According to McAdam, the civil rights movement could prosper as a result of growing divisions within the ruling White elites. This meant that the civil rights movement had the opportunity to exploit those divisions as it gained access to elite allies that were instrumental in furthering the policy goals of the movement. The important lesson from this study is that social movements should not be seen as a direct reaction to grievances or specific problems within society, but that they can be seen as reactions to changes in the political system. Social movement organizations respond to the opportunities created by the system.

III. CONCLUSION

Social movement studies can be considered an important subfield within political science. They almost inevitably depart from a view of society in which social conflicts are seen as an integral part of the social structure. Movements also allow for a further democratization of society, enabling grassroots activism, and they are instrumental in bringing new topics onto the political agenda. Social movement theory has highlighted the role of resources and cultural and political conditions for the success of social movement organizations. The most recent decade has been characterized by efforts to integrate and consolidate these theoretical approaches. It seems clear that social movement activity in the current age is lower than it was in the heyday of the 1960s and 1970s, and the main challenge for social movement theory is to demonstrate that this subfield remains relevant for “mainstream” political science in periods of reduced social movement activity.
REFERENCES