Social movement theory: Past, present and prospects

Jacqueline van Stekelenburg & Bert Klandermans

When and why do people protest? And who is likely to participate in public protests? Around 1900, influential sociologists regarded all street protest as deviant behaviour. The classic paradigms held that (relative) deprivation, shared grievances and generalized beliefs were determinants of protest. The early scholars of contentious politics depicted protest as the politics of the impatient, maintaining that protest had an irrational element to it. As dissatisfaction with these classic paradigms grew, new ones emerged: structural paradigms such as resource mobilization and political process. While resource mobilization theory focuses on organization as a resource, political process theory emphasizes the political element of protest. Simultaneous with the rise of the structural paradigms was the emergence of social-constructivistic paradigms that concentrate on how individuals and groups perceive and interpret socio-political conditions. They focus on the role of cognitive, affective and ideational roots of contention and are broadly organized around three concepts: framing, identity and emotions. This chapter discusses these concepts as well as the social-psychology approach to social movements. The socio-political context of contentious politics is changing due to processes such as globalization and liberalization, and it is argued that these changes influence the rise and fall of social movements and their collective actions. Most social movement scholars assume that mutual integration of the structural and constructivistic paradigms can yield satisfactory explanations.
Social movements and collective action

The reason why people protest has occupied social scientists for a long time. The French psychologist Le Bon, a founding father of collective action studies, regarded all street protest as a form of deviant behaviour and developed his theory on crowds during a period of great social unrest in France in the 1890s. He believed that the destruction of religious, political and social beliefs in combination with the creation of new conditions of existence and thought as a result of the modern scientific and industrial discoveries of the time were the basis for a process of transformation of mankind’s thought. Ideas from the past, although half shattered, were still very powerful he believed, while the ideas that were to replace them were in a process of formation. The consequence, in his analysis, was a period of transition and anarchy. Le Bon’s ideas were reflected in classic breakdown theories that regarded participation in collective action as an unconventional, irrational type of behaviour. The classic paradigm held that (relative) deprivation, shared grievances and generalized beliefs were determinants of participation. In fact, early students of the subject depicted contentious politics as the politics of the impatient and maintained that protest had an irrational element to it.

Times changed and so did both contentious politics and theoretical approaches to contentious politics. The late 1960s saw a huge growth in social movement activity: the student movement, the civil-rights movement, the peace movement, the women’s movement and the environmental movement all flourished. Interpretations of major forms of collective action changed from being viewed as spontaneous ‘irrational’ outbursts to movement activities with concrete goals, articulated general values and interests, and rational calculations of strategies. Breakdown theories clearly fell short as explanations of this proliferation of social movement activity, all the more so because it seemed to be preceded by growing rather than declining welfare. This, combined with changing forms of collective action, required new theoretical approaches, and several developed in the 1970s.

These new theoretical approaches can be categorized as structural and social constructivistic paradigms. Resource mobilization and political process are examples of structural approaches. While resource mobilization places an emphasis on organizational aspects and resources, the political process approach emphasizes the political aspects of collective action. The social constructivistic perspective, on the other hand, concentrates on how individuals and groups perceive and interpret these conditions and focuses on the role of the cognitive,

---