The Ecological Movements in the Light of Social Movements’ Development

The Cases of Four Contemporary Industrialized Societies

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Abstract

Social movements are defined as a form of collective action seeking a global social change. The ecological movements, to which some attention is paid here, have already worked to initiate social change, but the grass-roots movements are confronted with difficult choices in order to insure the maintenance and reinforcement of the link between ideas and concrete actions. Those movements have gone through distinct integration phases in four societies (France, the former Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), Quebec, and the U.S.A.). The structural integration phase has been characterized by the differentiation process, as well of the problems as of the groups themselves, and by the institutionalization process. The political and cultural integration phases have been characterized by the passage, at various degrees, through the electoral process and the legitimation process.

Presentation

There has been a sharp increase in initiatives and associations active in the environmental field in contemporary industrialized societies, especially in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The background for the ecological protest was the post-war industrialization push, in the course of which the problems of unlimited growth became a subject of awareness. If the case of the “DDT” did awaken the Western world’s consciousness in the 1960s, the debate proceeded quite quickly to dimensions that went far beyond the pollution theme. The crisis symptoms (growth crisis, oil crisis, etc.) did their part to expose the “limits to growth;” ecologists’ warnings were proven by environmental destruction of major proportions; chemical waste scandals, and chemical and nuclear accidents. All this turmoil paved the way for the development of ecological movements in those societies, sometimes as the continuation of...
existing movements and sometimes as new players in the social, political, and cultural arenas.

The ecological movements have to be similarly characterized with numerous other social movements that are likely to promote social change in an unprecedented manner. The movements of the post-war period, such as the women’s movement, various ecological movements, the peace movement, and so on, are significant for social change because they have drawn attention to the problems of the modern unlimited growth society through new forms of conflict and protest, thereby differing from traditional movements such as the labour movement. The latter’s institutionalized mode of acting out conflicts, along with its institutionalized forms of interest representation, contain a somewhat less innovative potential than newer movements. If social movements are one of the main gateways to social change, their character can change over time as they become subject to structural, political, and cultural integration phases.

These movements are closely related in so many respects that it is often difficult to avoid a certain confusion when depicting their goals and their final degree of success in social change, especially after they have gone through some sort of social integration. The problem raised first is one of definition, especially with the problem of the limit between a movement and an institution. Many studies, hence, have been caught up in trying to solve this definition problem and, to mention just a few, let us refer to the works of Touraine in France, Brand and Offe in Germany, Klandermans in Holland, Maheu and Vaillancourt in Quebec, Canada, Zald, McCarthy and Tarrow in the U.S.A., and Melucci and Alberoni in Italy.

Our goal here is to find out the similarities and differences among the ecological movements in four societies. The observations will be limited to the cases of France, the former Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), Quebec (considered here as a “distinct society” within Canada) and the U.S.A. The comparison will bear on the structural, political, and cultural integration phases of ecological movements, although some references will be made to different social movements at large. After some theoretical considerations on the definition problems, the scope of social movements, and the problem of the elusive boundaries between movements and institutions, we will recall some of the facts encountered in every society with regard to their ecological movements.

The Scope of Social Movements

The question of definition raises many problems such as what is the scope of the social movement? what differentiates it from the institution?, and so on. The social movements’ scope is wide and the criteria remain elusive. For instance, some authors will refer to the mobilization capacity in reference to the movements’ “beginnings,” to the “grass-roots democracy” that should characterize the movements’ structure. Defining social movements as a form of collective action seeking a global social change, in reference to Touraine’s