

Chapter I

Identities, Grievances, and New Social Movements

Hank Johnston

Enrique Laraña

Joseph R. Gusfield

In the last two decades, the emergence of new forms of collective action in advanced industrial societies stimulated a provocative and innovative reconceptualization of the meaning of social movements. Its relevance has been highlighted by the process of delegitimization of major political parties in Europe at the end of the 1980s, as shown in recent electoral results that have demonstrated considerable support for new or nontraditional parties in Germany, Austria, Italy, and France. In both Europe and North America, movements have arisen that stretch the explanatory capacities of older theoretical perspectives. Peace movements, student movements, the anti-nuclear energy protests, minority nationalism, gay rights, women's rights, animal rights, alternative medicine, fundamentalist religious movements, and New Age and ecology movements are but a sampling of the phenomena that have engaged the puzzled attention of sociologists, historians, and political scientists. What is significant for sociologists in such developments is the inability of these movements to be clearly understood within the European or American traditions of analysis. They constitute the anomalies of Kuhnian "normal science."

For much of this century sociological studies of social movements have been dominated first by theories of ideology and later by theories of organization and rationality. Especially in Western Europe, but also in the United States, sociologists have focused on the systems of ideas that movements have espoused. These have often been described in general terms, such as socialism, capitalism, conservatism, communism, fascism. The problem of the analyst has often been that of understanding the economic or class base of the movement or at least some set of discrete interests and sentiments, such as social status, that characterize a group in the social structure. The movement could then be seen as a response

to a felt sense of injustice that the ideology specified and that provided the basis for mobilization. Partisanship and mobilization involved a commitment to the ideas and goals of the movement and its program.

The basic problem of many analysts was to understand the process of movement formation by analysis of the social structure that gave rise to the ideology and the problems to which it was addressed. The focus was directed toward groups that occupied specific places in the social structure from which derived objective interests and demands. The nineteenth-century emphasis on labor and capital fit well into this general paradigm, from which it was also derived. Labor movements and the rise of new political parties have long been the ideal-typical images of social movements and mobilization; through them, the revolutionary actions of communism and fascism were further examined.

Marxist-oriented scholars, as well as some others, have emphasized the class origins and interests of movements and the ideological programs accompanying them. This emphasis on elements of ideology, commitment, and partisanship led to the dominance of ideas as ideologies in understanding the emergence of social movements and collective action. It furthered a focus on the strains and conflicts in social structure as the sources of movement formation, dissent, and protest activity. What it ignored was the importance of organization and the consequences of organizing into group associations. It assumed that the existence of potential conflicts and strains would automatically generate associations of people to correct them.

An interest in the organizational aspects of movements tapped an existing vein of theoretical and empirical interests. Since Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch there had been a keen interest in charisma and routinization through the functional and strategic considerations of organizational expansion. A series of studies of religious organizations focused on the pathos associated with loss of an original mission as sects became churches. Others, influenced by Weber's writings on bureaucratic organization, have emphasized the internal changes within the movement as an organization. In more recent years, guided in part by conceptions of rational choice, sociologists have gone well beyond Weberian insights into a focus on how collective action depended on the ability

of associations to mobilize resources and to conduct the organization on the basis of planned and rational action.

As a corrective to the dominance of ideas and structural strain in the older theories, the resource mobilization perspective was a welcome addition and substitution. Sociologists, especially Charles Tilly and John McCarthy and Mayer Zald, pointed out that there was always strain in the society and that mobilization required both resources and a rational orientation to action. The actor in movements and in protest action was not under the sway of sentiments, emotions, and ideologies that guided his or her action, but rather should be understood in terms of the logic of costs and benefits as well as opportunities for action. When dealing with existent organized groups, as in labor unions or in the civil rights movement, the emphasis on organization could ignore the already existing ideologies. By treating the activities of collective actors as tactics and strategy, the analyst could examine movements and countermovements as engaged in a rational game to achieve specific interests, much like pluralist competition among interest groups in political analysis.

This broad canvas, theoretically spanning finer conceptual and empirical issues that have been debated for more than a century, nevertheless constitutes the painted backdrop for two fundamental questions about new social movements. Why did they create a theoretical problem for the sociologist? And what was lacking in either of the general perspectives outlined above? Such movements had certainly occurred in the past. Earlier this century, witness the Young Movements of Europe (Young Germany, Young Italy, etc.) and the temperance movements in the United States or suffrage movements and student movements on both sides of the Atlantic. In many ways, the student movements of the 1960s, by raising issues that were more than just "problems of interpretation," heralded the first challenges to these classic paradigms (Flacks 1967; Laraña 1982; Katsiaficas 1987).

The concept "new social movements" is a double-edged sword. On one side, it has contributed to the knowledge of contemporary movements by focusing attention to the meaning of morphological changes in their structure and action and by relating those changes with structural transformations in society as a whole. These changes are the source of these movements' "novelty" when compared with the model of collective action based in

class conflict that prevailed in Europe since the industrial revolution (Melucci 1989, see also Chapter 5). On the other side, there is a tendency to "ontologize" new social movements (Melucci 1989). This means using the term broadly, as if it captures the "essence" of all new forms of collective action. There is also a tendency to give the concept more explanatory power than is empirically warranted, which no doubt derives from its popularization. The concept, however, refers to an approach rather than a theory; it is not a set of general propositions that have been verified empirically but just an attempt to identify certain common characteristics in contemporary social movements and develop analytical tools to study them (Melucci 1989; Laraña 1993b). The bundle of new social movements mentioned earlier were difficult to conceptualize with either the imagery of the ideological movements of the past or the rationally organized interest group.

Conceived as such, the analysis of new social movements (NSMs) can be advanced by cross-cultural research and by contrasting them with movements of the past that originated in class conflict. To this end, a good starting place is the specification of the fundamental characteristics of NSMs. By no means do all current movements display the following characteristics of new social movements, nor can all current movements be designated new. In many cases, their appearance among current movements leads us to conceptualize them along dimensions of differences from earlier cases of collective action and social movements.

First, NSMs do not bear a clear relation to structural roles of the participants. There is a tendency for the social base of new social movements to transcend class structure. The background of participants find their most frequent structural roots in rather diffuse social statuses such as youth, gender, sexual orientation, or professions that do not correspond with structural explanations (Klandermans and Oegema 1987). This has been striking in two especially strong movements: the Greens in Europe and the ecological movement in America. It is evident also in such other movements as the anti-nuclear energy movement in Europe and America or the animal and children's rights movements in the United States.

Second, the ideological characteristics of NSMs stand in sharp contrast to the working-class movement and to the Marxist

conception of ideology as a unifying and totalizing element for collective action. Especially in Europe but also in the United States, movements were characteristically perceived in accordance with overarching ideologies: conservative or liberal; right or left; capitalist or socialist. Marxist thought, always more dominant in Europe than in America, provided the paradigm for perceptions of action, either bourgeois or proletarian. The new social movements are more difficult to characterize in such terms. They exhibit a pluralism of ideas and values, and they tend to have pragmatic orientations and search for institutional reforms that enlarge the systems of members' participation in decision making (Offe 1985; Cohen 1985; Laraña 1992, 1993a). These movements have an important political meaning in Western societies: They imply a "democratization dynamic" of everyday life and the expansion of civil versus political dimensions of society (Laraña 1993b).

Third, NSMs often involve the emergence of new or formerly weak dimensions of identity. The grievances and mobilizing factors tend to focus on cultural and symbolic issues that are linked with issues of identity rather than on economic grievances that characterized the working-class movement (Melucci 1985, 1989). They are associated with a set of beliefs, symbols, values, and meanings related to sentiments of belonging to a differentiated social group; with the members' image of themselves; and with new, socially constructed attributions about the meaning of everyday life. This is especially relevant to the ethnic, separatist, and nationalistic movements within existing states. The Catalan and Basque movements in Spain, the Asian and Hispanic movements in the United States, the ethnic movements in the former Soviet Union and even Palestinian nationalism are all examples of new identities emerging in the modern world. The women's movement and the gay rights movement also exemplify this trend. All of these new identities are formed as both private and public ones or old ones remade along new lines.

Fourth, the relation between the individual and the collective is blurred. Closely related to the above point, many contemporary movements are "acted out" in individual actions rather than through or among mobilized groups. The "hippie" movement is the most striking instance, but it is equally true of aspects of other movements where the collective and the individual are blurred, for example, in the gay rights and the women's movements. An-

other way of thinking about the same phenomena is that in and through movements that have no clear class or structural base, the movement becomes the focus for the individual's definition of himself or herself, and action within the movement is a complex mix of the collective and individual confirmations of identity. The student movements and various countercultural groups of the 1960s were among the earliest examples of this aspect of collective action.

Fifth, NSMs often involve personal and intimate aspects of human life. Movements focusing on gay rights or abortion, health movements such as alternative medicine or antismoking, New Age and self-transformation movements, and the women's movement all include efforts to change sexual and bodily behavior. They extend into arenas of daily life: what we eat, wear, and enjoy; how we make love, cope with personal problems, or plan or shun careers.

Sixth, another common feature of NSMs is the use of radical mobilization tactics of disruption and resistance that differ from those practiced by the working-class movement. New social movements employ new mobilization patterns characterized by nonviolence and civil disobedience that, while often challenging dominant norms of conduct through dramatic display, draw equally on strategies influenced by Gandhi, Thoreau, and Kropotkin that were successfully used in the past (Laraña 1979; McAdam 1988; Morris 1984; Klandermans and Tarrow 1988).

Seventh, the organization and proliferation of new social movement groups are related to the credibility crisis of the conventional channels for participation in Western democracies. This is especially true with regard to the traditional mass parties from which NSMs tend to have a considerable degree of autonomy—and even disdain. This crisis is a motivational factor for collective action in search of alternative forms of participation and decision making relating to issues of collective interest (Whalen and Flacks 1989; Melucci 1989).

Finally, in contrast to cadre-led and centralized bureaucracies of traditional mass parties, new social movement organizations tend to be segmented, diffuse, and decentralized. While there is considerable variation according to movement type, the tendency is toward considerable autonomy of local sections, where collective forms of debate and decision making often limit linkages with