

## Tomorrow the world? The rocky path of social movements

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Created 2002-10-01 23:00

We live in an era of movements. Thirty years ago, the industrialised world was swept by a wave of youthful movement activity that encompassed women's liberation, gay and lesbian rights, anti-racism, radical social reform and revolution. Today, a worldwide movement demands all these things once again but this time in the new context of globalisation.

But right across the political and social spectrum 'extra-parliamentary activity' has become the norm. We are now as likely to see 'Middle England' on a mass demonstration, or using direct action to protest threatened rural lifestyles or international debt, as we are to see radical students demanding the dissolution of the World Trade Organization [1] (WTO).

The journey from shared grievance to collective action is now so routine as to be banal. However, of all these mobilisations only a handful will transform themselves into mass movements that capture the imagination of millions and bring about profound change.

Since that explosion of activity in the 1960s and 1970s, a great deal of academic consideration has gone into answering why and how protest groups develop into mass movements. The prime conclusion is that the variables involved are multiple and extraordinarily complex and dynamic. Grievance alone is certainly not enough. For every mobilisation that goes no farther than a local community centre, there must be thousands of social and political grievances unheard beyond the living-room gripe.

### How do movements grow, and authorities respond?

However, it is now widely acknowledged that some key conditions are required if a movement is to grow and gain influence.

First, grievance is indeed essential, but is only transformed into the spur to collective action by a new *threat* or *loss*. Truckers across Western Europe may have complained about fuel tax for years but it was the sudden price rise in oil that led to mass action.

Secondly, the transformation of grievance into action requires the existence of a new *opportunity* for mobilisation. Unexpected shifts in alliances and policies amongst a nation's political elite may prompt long suppressed activism. The way Mikhail Gorbachev's reform drive spurred rebellion against hard-line Eastern European regimes – who could no longer rely on Soviet backing – is a classic case of such political opportunity. But opportunities may also be cultural and social – the radicalism of gay liberation in the early 1970s would have been impossible without the massive change in sexual attitudes of the 1960s.

Thirdly, movements need *resources*. These may come in the form of money or assets but equally valuable resources may be found in volunteer labour or donations in kind. Possibly the most central resource, however, is the types of social and institutional networks from which new movements can win support and obtain further material benefits. The Labour movement drew its

greatest support from networks formed within the factories of the Fordist revolution. The black civil rights movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s spread rapidly through the black churches of the southern states. The social movements of the 1960s and 1970s relied heavily on the masses of students entering the expanding universities of Western Europe and America.

Fourthly, networks are also important because they allow movements to tailor a *vision* to the circumstances and values of a specific audience. Such a vision is vital to explain and guide a movement's action. At the very least, a movement must explain to its current and potential supporters what is wrong, who or what is to blame, and what can be done. Such visions can be very simple (a consumer group's demands for a better or safer product) or extraordinarily elaborate and sophisticated (the great effort of analysis and debate that has gone into socialist ideology over the last two centuries).

Fifthly, movements also need innovative and appropriate *strategies* and *tactics*. All the methods of protesting we now take for granted were all new and unexpected at one stage. Often, such innovation occurs in the heat of conflict with authority and may be eminently practical responses to a certain situation. A prime example is the imaginative tree-climbing and tunnel-digging adopted by anti-roads protesters in the UK in the early 1990s.

The most effective tactical innovations, however, are those that can be adapted to different circumstances, thus opening up the possibility of extending a protest throughout society. The mass demonstration has shown itself to be probably the most flexible tactic of the contemporary era, but non-violent direct action may not be far behind.

Sixthly, movements need to build the right *structures* to effectively mobilise individuals and coordinate activity with other organisations.

For a nascent movement to be blessed with opportunities, resources, vision, adaptable strategies and tactics, and effective structures simultaneously is beyond the usual bounds of good fortune. Only some of these factors are within the control of a movement's leaders (this may well help to explain why widespread social protest is so rare). However, even with a favourable combination of qualities, the response of authority will also play a major role in determining how far protest spreads.

There is no formula for how authority should respond. For example, repression can, under different circumstances and at different times, either defuse a rebellion or only serve to deepen and expand the movement. In truth, the most effective responses by authorities often combine a range of tactics including repression, facilitating moderate parts of the movement, carrying out reform which meets some demands, waiting out the protest and eventually claiming to be the champion of the movement's demands.

However, in the period between a movement growing and authority getting its act together, there is the space for a serious expansion of protest. At such times, once moderate groups suddenly adopt radical tactics and demands. Apolitical individuals and associations may rapidly find a political voice. Individuals from within the state may ally themselves to the protestors. The innovative tactics employed in the early stages of the movement will be used more widely in new circumstances and in support of different claims. And there may be a growing sense that a wide variety of differing demands are actually a common cause. Most notably, many aspects of daily life that previously ran smoothly and without question will face considerable disruption and challenge.

It is also at such a point that a significant counter-movement may spring up, employing the language and tactics of the original campaigns.

## **Movements in the global arena**

What can this analysis tell us about contemporary movements campaigning for global change?

First, despite some of the more excitable analyses, the movement for global change is nowhere near the situation of widespread protest described immediately above. Whether the movement continues to grow and prompts such an upsurge in political activism will depend in large part on how well it meets the conditions above.

It is certainly a movement that has taken advantage of some excellent political opportunities to mobilise in response to grievances across the world. Prime amongst these is undoubtedly the collapse of the Seattle meeting of the WTO in 1999, which saw developing nations take a far more aggressive stance towards the global trade policies of the developed economies. Famously, this was met with a significant demonstration against the WTO on the streets of Seattle. This not only allowed the demonstrators to claim that they had contributed to the collapse of the meeting but also won them massive worldwide publicity for their views. It also suggested that the movement had new allies amongst the leaders of the developing world.

The 11 September attack, however, has proved to be far more ambiguous. For some aspects of the movement, it may still yet act as a major opportunity to extend protest – especially in Europe and the developing world – against the US war on terror and, more broadly, the foreign and global trade policies of the developed world. However, in America itself, there can be little doubt that 11 September has severely limited the space for dissent at a time of patriotic fervour.

In terms of resources and networks, the movement is also blessed – but only up to a point. The more moderate wing of the movement has benefited enormously from the considerable wealth and sophisticated networks of the larger aid agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and faith communities. Nowhere was this more significant than in the massive campaign that developed around debt cancellation in the late 1990s. However, the radical wing of the movement remains a shoestring operation and seems still to be struggling to find a strong basis in a key institution or social network.

The vision of the movement for global change may at best be said to be still evolving. The radical wing has a strong message that certainly performs well the three key tasks of a movement vision described above. But questions must remain about the extent to which this vision can have credibility, in a context where increasing numbers of jobs and lifestyles rely heavily on the smooth operation of the global economy.

The moderate wing suffers from a different problem. Although its reformist outlook may prove to have mass appeal for those who want change but not at the cost of economic meltdown, there is no clear vision comparable to that of the radical wing or even of the neo-liberal right. What exists is a mass of single issues united by nothing more than a broad desire to 'do good' on a global scale.

On strategies and tactics, the movement may be on its strongest ground. The Internet has been employed with ingenuity and great effect. The fact that counter-movements have attempted to imitate the political use of the Internet is a clear indication of success in this area. Much of the movement, however, seemed to take Seattle as a sign that the old, staple tactic of mass demonstration was the way forward. For a variety of reasons, including violence on the part of authorities and some demonstrators, this has proved not to be the case and no doubt more imaginative approaches will develop in time.

Perhaps most worryingly for the movement, however, is its weakness in terms of mobilising structures. This is a highly diverse movement for such an early stage of its existence. Coordinating varied elements and developing a cohesive vision is vital, as all social movements are extremely prone to division and consequent collapse. Unfortunately, organisational and ideological unity have been hampered by institutional rivalry amongst aid agencies and campaign groups on the reformist wing and by the influence of an anarchist-inspired anti-organisation culture on the radical wing.

There are some signs that these problems are lessening, as NGOs work together in [Jubilee 2000](#) [2] and, more recently, the [Trade Justice Movement](#) [3], and as the anarchist influence on the radical wing wanes in the wake of the violent conflict at Genoa and preceding demonstrations. However, there is still some way to go in creating the necessarily innovative and hardy structures that can mobilise many different forces on a global scale. In short, the movement for global change appears already to be at a turning point in its brief existence.

Ambiguity is currently the key characteristic of all the conditions that can catapult a social movement into the big time. Some of this ambiguity will only be resolved by world events well beyond the control of the movements themselves. Other aspects, however, require hard thinking and concerted action on the part of leaders and core activists.

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