

# Why Do Social Movements Emerge?

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Social movements have become a major force for social change and progress in modern society, both at a national and international level. Movements such as the Black Lives Matter movement, the Metoo movement and the Pride movement have all been highly influential in addressing social issues and grievances. However, not all perceived grievances or social issues generate a social movement (Menocal, 2016). This raises the question of why social movements emerge, an issue which has become highly contested. **This assignment will argue that social movements emerge as a result of aggrieved groups with the necessary resources and political opportunities, that become aware of the potential for change through group action.** The assignment will employ Tarrow's interpretation of social movements, which defines social movements as 'collective challenges based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and

authorities' (1994, p.4). The assignment will also refer to the group from which the social movement emerges as the 'deprived group'. Initially, the assignment will set out the political process theory for social movement, by which the assignment is informed. Secondly, the assignment will consider the various forms of resources required for social movements to emerge. Then, it will consider the ways in which political opportunities support the emergence of social movements, and how there must be a process of conscientisation regarding the group's situation, referred to as a process of cognitive liberation, for social movements to emerge. The assignment will incorporate empirical examples to support the line of argument. Finally, opposing arguments involving criticisms of the political process theory and alternative theoretical approaches will be presented.

This assignment is largely informed by the political process theory (PPT), as first set out by Doug McAdam in his book *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (1982). It largely builds on the resource mobilisation approach to social movements, and emphasises the role of resources in why social movements emerge (Kriesi, 2011). Such resources can take many forms, including financial resources, organisational capabilities, human capital and individual human agency. However, PPT is more extensive than the resource mobilisation theory in its explanation to social movements. Firstly, it also focuses on changes in the structure of political opportunities as a reason for why social movements are formed. (McAdam, 1982, p.40). This assignment will employ McAdam's explanation of political opportunities, which states that they tend to derive from societal events and processes that undermine the assumptions upon which the political establishment is set up, and involve structural changes or power shifts that groups can use to their advantage (1982, p.40-41). Examples include wars and demographic changes. Finally, PPT states that the emergence of a social movement requires a process of increased awareness of the unjust position of the deprived group, and of the fact that there are possibilities for improvements in their situation (McAdam, 1982, p.51). This process through which a group collectively defines their situation as unfair and as potentially subject to change through group action is referred to by McAdam as 'cognitive liberation' (1982, p. 48)

Firstly, in order for a movement to gather around an existing grievance, organisational resources are required (McCarthy and Zald, 1977; McAdam, 1982). Such organisational resources involve a group's capability to provide a structured and effective network and organisation, targeted towards a shared goal (Ashbee, 2020a). Financial capabilities are one of several factors contributing to the organisational capacity, however they are not a prerequisite

for successful organisation. Organisation facilitates further resource aggregation, a certain level of which is required in order for social movements to successfully emerge (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). Furthermore, it also provides an effective network to the actors operating within the movements, further enabling the emergence of the social movement. An example illustrating this is the 1960s and 1970s movement of senior citizens in the United States of America (US) collectively campaigning for Medicare; a movement which was only initiated after the AFL-CIO and the National Council of Senior Citizens became involved and, used their organisational capacity to mobilise the senior citizens around the issue (McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Hoffman, 2003). This movement did not develop directly from the grievance of insufficient healthcare provision. Instead, it was the organisation of these groups which mobilised thousands of seniors and caused them to act on their grievances, emphasising the significance of organisational capabilities as a type of resource required for social movements to emerge.

Furthermore, human resources in the form of relatively large number of supporters are required for all types of activities engaging in social conflict (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). They make up the backbone of the movements and provide legitimacy and authority to the call for social change. It is also the supporter base of social movements that provide further resources such as money, facilities and labour - further fuelling the emergence of social movements (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). Movements such as the Arab Spring protests, and the so-called 'Yellow Vest protesters' in France are unlikely to have emerged had it not been for the large numbers of individuals participating in the movement, without which they would not have had amongst other things the same level of political leverage or recognition as a serious movement (France 24, 2019; Ellyatt, 2019; Al Jazeera, 2011). Whilst not all movements require supporter bases of such large scales, supporters are a crucial resource for social movements, without which they cannot emerge.

Human capabilities and agency in the form of leadership figures are another form of human resources which are 'critical' for social movements to emerge (Morris and Staggenborg, 2002). Whilst the extent to which social movements have recognised leaders varies, most have some form of leadership figures. They may not be officially chosen, however these leadership figures will be prominent actors within the movement, who act as strategic decision-makers and inspire and organise the participants of the movement (Gusfield, 1996; Morris and Staggenborg, 2002). Gusfield points to the dual roles of such leaders; on one hand they are important within the movement as someone who can devise strategies, inspire commitment in the supporting base and mobilise its supporters. At the same time, these

leadership figures have a significant role in representing the movements in wider society, and have a significant responsibility in attracting more supporters, as well as articulating the demands, goals and interests of the movement (Gusfield, 1966; Morris and Staggenborg, 2002). An example of such a leader is Martin Luther King Jr. He was very important in the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement in the USA, amongst others thing due to his articulation of the non-violence strategy, as well as his role in organising events such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the March on Washington (BBC, n.d.; Jahr and Sirevåg, 2019). A further such leadership figure is Betty Friedan who, most notably through her book *Feminine Mystique*, has been credited as one of the triggering factors behind the modern feminist movement (Chansky, 2008). These examples illustrate the potential role influential leadership figures in a social movement can play, emphasising the importance of human agency as resources social movements can command.

Furthermore, the moral resources of emerging social movements are important in ensuring their support from the wider population. Moral resources involve the ability to employ established moral principles in order to argue a case, and are a significant source of legitimacy for emerging social movements (Ashbee, 2020a). Moral resources also enable groups to convince the public that their pursued goal is ethically and morally justified. This invokes sympathy and empathy in the population, as people become increasingly aware of struggled deprived groups face. This moral legitimacy is particularly important in gathering the support of those individuals outside the deprived group (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). They do not themselves experience the negative effects of the social issue in question, and are less likely to feel strongly enough about the issue in order to get involved. Contributions from those who are not themselves direct beneficiaries of the goal pursued are significant for social movements, and with no such support it would be hard for social movements to emerge (Jenkins, 1983). The Civil Rights Movement is an example of the importance of such moral resources. Thousands of white people supported the movement because they thought it was the ethically right thing to do. this support, from outside the deprived group, played a significant role in the formation of the movement (Thompson, 2013; BBC, 2019). Therefore, it can be seen that moral resources are a crucial reason for why social movements emerge.

Political opportunities can lower the cost of organisation for deprived groups. (Jenkins, 1983). A reduction in the cost of organisation for the deprived groups facilitates increased organisation within the aggrieved population; signifying an improvement in a key resource required for social movements to emerge (Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy and Zald, 1977). One form of political opportunity through which this occurs is increases in wealth in the deprived

group. Such an increase involves a structural change in society, undermines the assumption that the groups pertain to a fixed income group, with the capabilities it grants them, and improves the status of the group, thereby classifying as a political opportunity. An increase in wealth grants the group increased access to resources, thus reducing the relative cost of organisation and facilitating collective action. This could clearly be seen in the Civil Rights Movement in the US, where there is widespread agreement that the increase in the median income in African American communities was a significant factor behind the emergence of the movement (Jenkins, 1983; Armato and Caren, 2002). Another form of political opportunity and structural change which facilitates organisation is increased urbanisation, or increased participation in organised activities within the population, such as clubs and churches. Both of these aspects were highly significant in the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement (Jenkins, 1983; Armato and Caren, 2002). Whilst the aforementioned examples do not constitute an exhaustive list, they illustrate the ways in which these opportunities can significantly support the emergence of social movements through lowering the cost of organisation for deprived groups.

In addition, the structure of political opportunities can lead to the formation of social movements through a 'restructuring of existing power relations' (McAdam, 1982, p. 41). In some cases, shifting power relations will undermine the stability of the entire political system, thereby encouraging the emergence of further insurgency and the emergence of social movements to exploit this instability (McAdam, 1982, p.42). Alternatively, shifting power relations will purely involve an increase the power and political leverage of a single deprived group, thereby encouraging the emergence of a social movement to improve the situation of this group (McAdam, 1982, p.42). An example of an instance where a single group in society received more leverage was the killing of George Floyd in the US at the hands of a police officer. This sparked worldwide outrage towards the brutal murder, and created empathy for African Americans due to the discrimination they routinely experience. The attention and empathy that emerged as a result of this discrimination served as highly effective political leverage, thus triggering the emergence of worldwide protests against police brutality and racism (Altman, 2020; Safi, 2020).

McAdam states that in order for social movements to emerge, people in the deprived group must collectively recognise that their status is unjust, that it is rooted in the political system, and that it is subject to change through collective action (1982, p.51). As set out previously in the assignment, this is what McAdam refers to as 'cognitive liberation' (1982, p.51). It is important that individuals believe the current political system lacks legitimacy, and that there

is a realistic prospect that their own participation in the social movement would make a meaningful change (Caren, 2007). Such a process of conscientisation, or cognitive liberation is facilitated by factors such as expanding political opportunities for the deprived group, as well as the actions of leadership figures (Kriesi, 2011). An example of a moment of cognitive liberation would be in the 2017 when Harvey Weinstein was accused of rape, around the same time as numerous well-known women opened up about their sexual abuse (Kottasová, 2019). This led to the formation of the #metoo movement, where thousands of women across the world shared their stories (Kottasová, 2019). Another example is January 2011 in Egypt. Largely due to the successful uprising in Tunisia, there was a moment of cognitive liberation in Egypt and people gained faith that through collective action they might be able to overthrow their regime in the same way as people had in Tunisia. As a result, the demonstrations for a democratic government spread rapidly, highlighting the significance processes of cognitive liberation can have in triggering social movements (Al Jazeera, 2016).

However, 'political opportunities' can be criticised for being a very vague concept, and scholars such as Gamson and Meyer argue it is therefore an insufficient explanation for the emergence of social movements (1996). Because the term could be used to explain virtually any aspect of society, it becomes so all-encompassing that it is eventually rendered useless as a means of explanation (Gamson and Meyer, 1996). Amenta and Halfman concur, claiming that whenever a movement arises there is bound to be something that can be interpreted as political opportunity (2011). However, the absence of clarity regarding this term largely stems from scholars applying it in the wrong way (McAdam, 1996). Firstly, McAdam points out that political opportunities and change are often wrongly confused with the 'processes by which these changes are interpreted and framed', which are separate from the objective political context and opportunities referred to by political process theorists (1996). Moreover, whilst one cannot deny that political opportunities appear in various forms, McAdam has examined the ways in which various scholars have interpreted the concept of political opportunity, and concludes that there is in fact a substantial amount of agreement on the definition (1996). Generally, there is a consensus that political opportunities involve structural changes and power shifts, and can be broken down into four dimensions: the degree of stability of the elite alignments that sustain a polity, the presence of alliances and the state's capability and propensity for oppressing the population (McAdam, 1996). Within these dimensions, it is possible to distinguish what factors influence the political opportunities of a group. Therefore, it can be seen that it is not the case that political opportunity is a concept that is too vague to explain the emergence of social movements.

A further criticism of the political process theory is that the approach focuses too much on the political context and pays insufficient attention to cultural factors (Goodwin, Jasper and Khattrra, 1999; Polletta, 1999). Goodwin, Jasper and Khattrra claim that not all social movements pursue goals that are equally focused on political victories (1999). Movements that to a larger extent challenge cultural norms and views, as opposed to political paradigms, will have a greater degree of independence from the political context (Kriesi, 2011). It will be partially cultural factors that create opportunities for such emerging movements, and political opportunities will not be as important (Kriesi, 2011). Therefore, the emergence of these movements will be less adequately explained by a thesis focused on purely political opportunities and factors, rather than cultural factors. An example of this is the feminist movement. A large part of the movement evolves around changes in cultural viewpoints regarding women's role in society, which could be the reason why this movement has received relatively little attention from political process scholars (Kriesi, 2011). However, this argument fails to recognise the distinction between political context and cultural context, and the opportunities they provide social movements with. McAdam argued that there is an essential distinction between objective and structural political opportunities and changes, and the subjective, 'collective processed by which these changes are interpreted and framed', which are largely determined by culture (McAdam, 1996). Political opportunities and events can have cultural impacts, but culture in itself cannot create such opportunities for social movements or serve as an independent trigger for the emergence of social movements (Polletta, 1999). According to this view, progress in the women's movement is caused by political changes in the society, which then have an impact on way in which people regard women's role in society. Therefore, it can be seen that the emphasis on political factors in political process theory is justified, seeing as culture is not something which will create opportunities for emerging social movements in the same way that political factors can.

Structural strain theory represents an alternative view to the emergence of social movements. theorists would argue that rather than originating in political opportunities, resources and cognitive liberation, social movements are caused by the emergence of 'structural strains' (Kriesi, 2011; Aslanidis, 2012). The concept of structural strain can be 'loosely defined as ambiguities, deprivations, conflicts, and discrepancies in social structure' (Buechler, 2008). Arising structural strains tend to involve significant societal change, such as increasing inequality, changes in real overall income or increasing ideological tensions (Ashbee, 2020b; Smelser, 1965). The social upheaval in society caused by such structural strains has disruptive psychological effects for individuals, and causes them to think about matters in a different way, encouraging collective action and the formation of social movements (Kriesi, 2011). For

example, structural strain theorists would emphasise the failure of leaders in preventing climate change as a cause of a structural strain, which led to the creation of the climate movement. However, the theory as a whole paints an inaccurate image of society, where social movements are seen as deviant phenomena that are outside the norm, and the result of the emergence of occasional ‘structural strains’ and the resultant grievances in society which these strains cause. In reality however, such grievances are constantly present in society, and therefore do not alone trigger the emergence of social movements, which are normal and enduring features of society (Buechler, 2008; Kriesi, 2011). Thus, it can be seen that the structural strain theory is not a credible explanation for the emergence of social movements. Instead, they are the result of groups which have undergone a process of cognitive liberation, and which have the appropriate resources and political opportunities in order to exploit these existing societal grievances in order to form social movements (Kriesi, 2011).

In conclusion, it can be seen that social movements are formed because aggrieved groups with the necessary resources and political opportunities become aware of the potential for improvement in their situation through collective action. This supports the political process theory of social movements. The main resources required for social movements to emerge involve organisational resources, human resources and so-called moral resources. Political opportunities reduce the costs of organisation for emerging social movements, and will also encourage their formation by shifting the existing power relations in society and undermining the stability of the established political system. Finally, a process of cognitive liberation is required for social movements to emerge, where the deprived group becomes aware for the potential for improvement in their unjust situation through collective action. Cognitive liberation is often facilitated by the political opportunities and resources a group possesses, illustrating how interlinked the three main factors are in the emergence of social movements. However, it is important to note just how significant a role resources play in the formation of social movements, meaning it is far more likely for movements to emerge among highly resourceful groups of society. For the most deprived groups, which tend to possess a low level of particularly organisational resources, the formation of social movements is even more difficult. This contributes to the overall increase in societal inequality, as for the groups who already have less, it is more difficult to address social issues affecting them negatively. In addition, further research in this area should be done into not only why social movements emerge, but also into why some social movements are more successful than others. This would enable a more holistic comprehension of the impact of social movements; a highly significant democratic mechanism.



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