

THE NATURAL HISTORY OF A SOCIAL MOVEMENT*

Dr. Haridas T. Muzumdar
Chairman, Department of Sociology
Dean, Division of Arts and Sciences
Arkansas A. M. and N. College
Pine Bluff, Arkansas

A theoretical discussion of social movements is highly desirable, especially since at this time social movements are mushrooming all over the world. Some of these so-called social movements are fly-by-night affairs and die off as suddenly as they arise. Some are incipient social movements, while some others legitimately deserve to be considered social movements. Authentic social movements continue to flourish and make an impact on society, national as well as global.

Social movements are collective efforts either to initiate a social change or to resist a change advocated by others. Social movements have been classified into "general" and "specific" by Herbert Blumer (1946) and into "directed" and "undirected" by Joseph R. Gusfield.² While these distinctions between general and specific movements and between "directed" and "undirected" movements are pertinent and useful, we need better descriptive terms. Would the classification of social movements into diffuse (dispersed, unorganized) and organized be more serviceable?

A diffuse social movement would be akin to what Gusfield calls the undirected phase of the social movement in which "the reshaping of perspectives, norms and values... occurs in the interaction of persons apart from a specific associational context".³ This is similar to the phenomenon of the cult in which one may be a cultist, a believer in the ideology of the new cult without becoming a member of an association specifically organized for the purpose of propagating the teachings of the cult and winning members, card-carrying members, so to say.

The organized social movement would have officers, headquarters, rituals, rules for membership, a well defined ideology, an association or a group of associations promoting it. And some members of society, either in association or singly, are apt to be opposed to a social movement, be it organized or in a diffuse state. It is important to bear in mind that a social movement is bound not only to elicit the loyalty of its members but also to affect the attitudes and norms and values of people not associated with the movement.

We may address ourselves to the following questions: (1) What gives rise to a social movement? (2) How does a social movement gain momentum and strength? (3) Under what conditions does a social movement continue to flourish? and (4) Under what conditions does it tend to disappear from the social scene?

First, there is a felt need for something which the existing order, the status quo, does not have. But the need, even when felt, is not enough to bring people together. The need must be transformed into an interest, into a consciously cherished aim. Two or more persons should share the interest in common and at least a few of them should be "concerned" enough to deem the accomplishment of the interest as vital to their very being. Need, interest, "concern" in the

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Quarker sense - this progressive psychological motivation accounts for the birth of any and every social movement.

Second, concern for the need is communicated to others with the aid of all possible techniques of communication available in the culture. Some advocates of the concern rely on moral suasion and intellectual persuasion, on truthful facts and interpretations, fully confident that all reasonable people will see the validity of the concern. Other advocates of the concern resort to intimidation and bribery, to fraud and distortion, to special pleading and theatricality. Such attempts to communicate the concern create a stir in society, an agitation. This stage is characterized by some groups in society as "educational", as "public education"; by others as "propaganda", depending upon whether they are in agreement or disagreement with the purposes of the agitation. We are all aware of the thin line separating "propaganda" from "education".

Third, agitation, launched to achieve the objective, creates a growing consciousness of the particular need in cross-sections of society, in variegated groups large or small. The interest is now shared by a larger circle of persons, each of them related to scores of different groups.

Fourth, these persons, with varying backgrounds and drawn from different groups, organize themselves into a group, a functional group or an association, to promote the achievement of the interest. Ordinarily, the original set of concerned persons becomes the nucleus and provides leadership; sometimes new leadership is provided from among the newly won converts.

Fifth, the organized group plans concerted actions and "drives" in order to win more adherents for the "cause". The interest is now definitely converted into a cause. New converts continue to support the cause. Norms and rituals begin to develop and the cause and its psycho-social complex become fairly well known to the public at large. The "ideology" of the new group is on the way to a sharp definition. If by now the cause has not been won and if the original impulse for change continues to be shared dynamically by the adherents of the cause, the stage is set for the launching of a well defined movement with a statement of its goals and methods, in short, its ideology. The movement, if it touches significant aspects of life, will divide the reflecting public into two groups - those for and those against. Woman suffrage and socialism, prohibition and anti-prohibition, pacifism and militarism are instances of movements that affect the public vitally and therefore are either praised or denounced by significant groups in society. As soon as the cause attains the status of a movement, formal membership rules are worked out and enforced, and in-group controls set in. Should it outlast a "generation" without achieving its objective, the movement would be transformed into an institution, a collective mode of response within the total social process. The trade union movement, for instance, has become a definite institution in capitalist society.

Within the institutionalized movement there arises a bureaucracy which glorifies the original interest and remains impervious to social changes which might have rendered the founding fathers' interest invalid in the present context or which might have helped achieve that interest in an oblique fashion. The best instances of rigid bureaucracy are to be found in the labor union movement - for instance, in the Musicians Union and the United Mine Workers Union. Sometimes, the bureaucracy of the institutionalized movement merely pays lip-service to the "cause" of the founding fathers and actually becomes an obstacle in the path of those who would carry on the work of the founding fathers. For apt illustrations

of this process, one may study the history of reform movements within established religious traditions. Paying lip service to the reformer, members of the institutionalized reform movement often forget the reformer's original purposes. The Daughters of the American Revolution (D.A.R.) are today frightened by the very word "revolution," even though their ostensible purpose is to revere the memory of the revolutionary founders of the nation.

When rigidity, inflexibility or reaction permeates an institution and is upheld by its bureaucracy, some persons either affiliated with the movement or outside of it feel a new need for change in the status quo and the cycle is repeated. The rise of various Protestant denominations within Christendom attests to the cyclic nature of social movements.

It may be noted, first, that if the original interest did not rest on a genuine need of the people, or a segment of the people, propaganda might succeed in launching the movement; but it would not become vital in the socio-cultural context - unless, of course, the propaganda were high-powered. Second, if the interest did not call into question the fundamental categories of culture, the movement would merely enlist the loyalty of faddists and of the lunatic fringe in the population. Calendar reformers, foes of superstition concerning Friday the 13th, believers in spirit seances, etc., continue to operate as groups without much disturbance to the cultural process. Third, if the interest is realized in the stage of agitation, no social movement will be born. Fourth, if the interest is accomplished after it is organized, the movement will liquidate itself; the woman suffrage movement, for instance. And again, after the accomplishment of the interest, the movement may espouse a related cause -- the League of Women Voters, for instance, or the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Or, sometimes, the movement may just continue in existence as a social grouping without any compelling interest or binding loyalty-- just to perpetuate the memory of past achievements.⁴

The rise of Christianity as a social movement illustrates these steps most vividly.

First, Jesus felt the need for a new form of worship and a new concept of the relations between man and man and between man and God.

Second, he communicated this concern of his to all who would listen to him, and he gathered around himself twelve fishermen.

Third, after his crucifixion, the original "apostles" and a newly won adherent to the cause, namely, Saul of Tarsus rechristened Paul, began to agitate, to broadcast Jesus' message to all and sundry, in the process courting persecution and martyrdom.

Fourth, Churches, associations of believers in the message of Jesus, began to spring up.

Fifth, the "cause" of Christianity began to be identified clearly in public thinking, and the Roman rulers began to persecute adherents to the cause of Christ.

Sixth, in the process, the ideology of the new social movement began to be defined clearly both for the enlightenment of its followers and of others.

Seventh, a vast bureaucracy came into being, with the Bishop of Rome as Pope, as Head of the new social movement, in order to glorify the life and teachings of

Jesus and the Founding Fathers.

Eighth, rumblings of discontent began to be heard as the Christian Church proscribed the slightest deviation from the interpretations put on Jesus's life and teachings by the Church bureaucracy. The more rigid became the stance of the Church bureaucracy, the more pressure was exerted by the discontented to reform the Church and to re-interpret the life and teachings of Jesus. This pressure ultimately led to the rise of the Protestant movement within the (Roman) Catholic Church. And we have instances of 57 different varieties of Protestant denominations which grew up because of dissatisfaction with some of the interpretations of Jesus and his teachings by earlier Protestant reformers.⁵

The labor movement as well as the Civil Rights movement in this country may be profitably studied within this frame of reference.

REFERENCES

1. John and Mavis Biesanz, Modern Society, 3rd ed. (Englewood, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968) p. 103.
2. Joseph R. Gusfield, "The Study of Social Movements," International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, pp. 445-452.
3. Ibid., p.445.
4. For further elaboration of this theme, see Haridas T. Muzumdar, The Grammar of Sociology (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1967), pp. 154-158; pp. 631-634.
5. Ibid., pp. 633-634.