

Values Mobilized: When, Why, and How Social Movements Occur

Jonathan Wood

Social movements are constituted by the collective mobilization of values against the status quo. They occur in the context of framed societal grievances which are left unaddressed by the hegemonic bloc. This bloc is made up of the dominant class and its subordinate allies. Those with similar values collectively work against what threatens them and toward their desired society. The values of those mobilized affect the means used by social movements to transform society and hegemonies to maintain them. Accordingly, this paper will explain when, why, and how social movements occur, borrowing from both theory and documentation of modern social movements.

When framed societal grievances are not resolved or disrupted by those with societal power, they create the fuel for social movements. This is what would be posited by Gramscian hegemony theory, which describes how the ruling bloc in society maintains hegemony over subordinate groups through coercion and manufactured consent.¹ To achieve control, the hegemons must adopt some of the interests of subaltern groups and assimilate them into living their lives through the hegemonic worldview.² While such coalition groups are led by the hegemons, antagonistic groups are dominated, subjugated, or liquidated.³ If coercion and consent are not maintained, as is the case when the grievances of subordinate groups are not fully placated or quashed, hegemony is threatened and these groups may rise up to challenge the hegemons' power.⁴ The hegemonic group may have to accommodate so much that they are transformed into a coalition subaltern or even be destroyed—this is how new hegemonies are created.⁵ As hegemonic groups usually exploit subordinate ones, grievances are

largely inevitable, and so are counter-hegemonic social movements.

Hegemonized societies have existed throughout history, and so do social movements, though their aims and results vary widely. Here, it is useful to borrow from David Aberle's classification of social movements based on what the movement is attempting to change, and by how much.⁶ Movements that aim to transform all of society in a radical way, like the socialist movement, are called *revolutionary*, while those that aim to change all of society in a limited way, like the Tea Party, are called *reformative*. Following Gramscian theory, the difference between radical and limited change depends on whether the demands of the movement necessitate the radical end of the current hegemony, or whether the subordinate groups and their grievances may be adopted into the coalition of the current hegemony. Movements that aim to change only a part of society in a radical or limited way are *alternative* and *redemptive* social movements, respectively. Such movements may be important, like the anti-bullying movement, but they do not threaten the hegemonic powers in society. Thus, social movements might have several aims and varying degrees of success, but it is in revolutionary social movements that the stakes are highest.⁷

Today's neoliberal age has created many unaccommodated grievances ignored by the hegemonic bloc. As neoliberalism's ability to manufacture consent has decreased, social movements have gained power.⁸ The neoliberal bloc's rise to global hegemony in the 1980s resulted in the end of the Keynesian welfare state of regulation, unionization, and high standards of living.⁹ It has also created a global surge in inequality and capitalist power, con-

tinued United States support for imperialism across the world, exacerbated global warming, and caused the Great Recession.¹⁰ It will undoubtedly cause further suffering before its demise. Given these factors and an electoral politics under a neoliberal consensus, many social movements have emerged: the global justice movement, the Zapatistas, the resistance to the Argentine dictatorship and Israeli occupation, the environmental movement, and the Occupy movement are only a few of many.¹¹

The way in which people mobilize their grievances depends on ‘frames.’ As Erving Goffman described them, frames are structures of interpretation that allow people “to locate, perceive, identify, and label” things in the world.¹² By giving meaning to phenomena, frames organize experience and guide actions, including social movements. David Snow and Robert Benford describe how frames function in social movements by highlighting how they may align and resonate with the frames of individual people, thus encouraging participation.¹³ But as there are many different ideological frames throughout society, shared grievances may result in the birth and promulgation of conflicting social movements. In response to the consequences of neoliberalism, especially given its legitimization crisis since the Great Recession, revolutionary social movements arose from both radical left and right frames.¹⁴ Chris Dixon’s *Another Politics* describes the modern anti-authoritarian, anti-oppression, anti-capitalist, and nonsectarian left, built from many historical strands.¹⁵ It continues to clash with the white supremacist and neo-fascist alt-right.¹⁶ Some frames reinforce the hegemony and others challenge it; those whose frames resonate with the hegemonic class may do nothing, or they may actively reproduce the status quo in a kind of everyday ‘social reinforcement movement’ produced by the hegemony.

Social movements must recruit people to join and actively participate in their cause—this is how they gain power. Snow and Benford propose that the frames advanced by movements must resonate with many people to succeed.¹⁷ Diagnostic framing of the problem, prognostic framing of solutions, and motivational framing to encourage participation are all important.¹⁸ Constituents of the water rights movement exemplify this when they elicit anger and hope, appeal to popular values like preserving the world for our descendants, refer to scientific discourse, and use symbols like David and Goliath.¹⁹

Snow et al. outline different frame alignment processes.²⁰ These include frame bridging and frame extension. Frame bridging consists of the linkage of similar but unconnected frames regarding a particular issue, while the frame extension addresses the expansion of a movement’s frame to encompass the interests and points of view of potential allies.²¹ These concepts are explored in *Another Politics*’ prescription of nonsectarianism, engaging reform issues to advance revolutionary movements, and revolutionizing the vision and aims of reform movements.²² Accordingly, social movements contest the hegemony, its frames, and social movements with conflicting frames.

Making the intrinsic rewards of participation greater than the costs is another means of motivating mobilization. J.P. Weismuller, for example, applies Olson’s “free-rider problem” to social movements: in this scenario, it is more “rational for individuals to abstain and reap the rewards of others’ involvement rather than paying the costs (time, effort, repression, marginalization, etc.) of participating in social movements.”²³ However, he adds that this may be overcome by working in small, non-hierarchical groups, for they “are bound by ties of mutual commitment and solidarity.”²⁴ Dixon also works with such strategies. He explains the importance of relationship-building, care, friendliness, and listening, as well as the benefits of offering opportunities for many levels and avenues of participation and spreading leadership skills so that all members can contribute.²⁵ He also emphasizes the importance of fighting in immediate, meaningful, and inspirational struggles beyond insular activist circles.²⁶ Dixon further notes that people resist dominant institutions in small ways every day.²⁷ In this sense, the purpose of social movements is to encourage and facilitate individuals’ grievances toward direct, collective action.

With this power, social movements seek to change the world in a variety of related ways. Because movements are groups of people aiming for a collective goal, they will be consciously strategic and organized in their work toward its achievement. Effective strategizing is essential.²⁸ To the movements in *Another Politics*, it involves three aspects: engaging with present issues while moving toward a new world, building counter-institutional power, and effectively and critically using organizations as vehicles for change.²⁹ The first is essential for movement-building, while the second largely consists of elite placation, but may evolve to be

counter-hegemonic. The third is outside of hegemony and necessary for progressing beyond what it is willing to accept. All involve power, strategy, and organization.

In short, social movements consist of collectives changing the status quo by using frames and intrinsic motivations to mobilize populations, and by strategically increasing and organizing their power to meet their objectives. They work against the structures that produce their grievances while advocating for a new world that will instantiate their values. One must note, however, that a group's ends are necessarily connected with their means: the values mobilized also strongly influence what tactics are used. The values of social movements are reflected both in their aims and their methods, thus prefiguring and expanding their new, ideal world within the present one.

In his discussion of 'prefigurative' politics, Dixon describes the tension between the contradictory and challenging necessity of such efforts: "on the one hand, developing entirely liberatory social relations is never fully possible in a context of domination; on the other hand, developing such social relations is crucial to building visionary movements capable of transforming the world."³⁰ He also highlights the potential dangers of prefigurative forms.³¹ Organizers may use them dogmatically and ineffectively—they sometimes focus on individual behavior rather than group practices and engage in absolutism and purging. They may become so fixated on prefigurative practice that they lose sight of their social goals, thus mistaking an inward-looking, prefigurative means for the end. With a strategic, experimental, and open-minded approach however, the new world can both exist in the old and push beyond it.³²

In the anti-authoritarian left, prefigurative practices are common and develop over time—a few of them are especially noteworthy. One is non-hierarchical decision-making, which critiques the dominating power structure of society, offers an inspiring and alternative vision, builds community and a sense of shared purpose, opens spaces for critical strategizing, and helps people develop democratic participation skills.³³ At its best, it is an ideal prefigurative practice, "both a tool and a vision" with "political and practical reasons."³⁴ Finding new ways of relating to one another is also an important and visionary practice: this includes acknowledging and working with the privilege and oppression of each member, genuinely caring for each other,

and simply being kind.³⁵ Developing prefigurative counter-institutions, spreading leadership, and organizing the inner capacities of affected communities to fight for change also count among such practices.³⁶ *Occupy Love* illustrates how love motivates the aims, frames, and methods of the Occupy movement, the environmental movement, and the indigenous rights movement.³⁷

Prefigurative practices are present in the resurgent radical right as well. Graham et al.'s paper on moral foundation theory posits that morality is made up of five evolutionary foundations which are found across human cultures: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity.³⁸ The levels of these values vary widely however, and they are expressed differently within various ideologies. Their survey data show that social conservatives in America score lowest on care and fairness foundations, but have high scores in the other three foundations.³⁹ A look at modern alt-right groups shows that these foundations are given form within the values and frames of toxic masculinity, white supremacy, ultra-nationalism, and the veneration of violence and domination.⁴⁰ In their tactics, these foundations find prefigurative forms in violent and hateful marches, attacks on left-wing protestors, displays of militarism and guns, defenses of symbols of oppression, and exclusion and targeting of minorities.⁴¹

Building on the idea of a hegemonic 'social reinforcement movement,' the values of the hegemonic frames influence the hegemonic bloc's tactics in exercising coercion and manufacturing consent against social movements. *Elsipogtog: The Fire Over Water* documents the movement of the Elsipogtog First Nation against the shale gas exploration on their territory in northern New Brunswick.⁴² In the face of a potential fracking-related contamination of their water, Elsipogtog First Nation allied with local Acadian and environmentalist groups to disrupt exploration work, clash violently with police and mainstream media, and protest alongside the Idle No More movement. The hegemonic bloc, made up of the state, corporate elites, and hegemonic media responded with riot police, military intervention, disparaging frames, and political posturing of liberal values and capitalist development. This is to be expected within the mainstream values and frames of state authority, which depicts colonial law as fair, the mainstream media as true, Indigenous peoples as ungrateful, and capitalist development as the central good of society.⁴³ Through such means, the hegemony reproduces and reinforces the old

world while preventing the emergence of a new one.

Thus, enacted values are central to social movements. Prefigurative politics take different forms among left- and right-wing social movements, reflecting different and often opposing values. They are also present in the hegemony insofar as they reinforce its dominant values. Both the context of values and the actions of social movements are therefore fundamentally intertwined.

Social movements are the mobilizations of framed grievances. Participants in social movements strive toward the creation of a new world in a hegemonic society. They grow so long as the hegemony does not sufficiently exercise coercion and manufacture consent. They act because frames

and intrinsic motivations push people to act. They operate in varying and conflicting ways that reflect their values. Social movements demonstrate the grievances of dissenters and give contested frames form—they are mobilized values.

In closing, another narrative has also been woven through this paper: global neoliberal hegemony, the counter-hegemonic frames that have struggled under its consensus, and the left and right revolutionary movements that have risen in neoliberalism's increasing crisis. Both narratives are building the foundations for a new world. As it stands, their contest will determine the fate of our societies. In the wake of this conflict, each individual must choose their values and decide how to act on them.

Notes

1. Steve Jones, "Chapter 3: Hegemony," in *Antonio Gramsci* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
2. Jones, 52–3.
3. Jones, 49.
4. Geoff Martin, "Critical Political Economy," (class lecture, International Political Economy from Mount Allison University, Sackville, NB, September 14, 2017).
5. Jones, *Antonio Gramsci*, 46–7; and Martin, "Critical Political Economy."
6. David F. Aberle, "A Classification of Social Movements," in *The Peyote Religion among the Navaho* (Chicago: Aldine Press, 1966).
7. Aberle, "A Classification of Social Movements," 315–33.
8. Martin, "Critical Political Economy."
9. Sam Pizzigati, *The Rich Don't Always Win: The Forgotten Triumph Over Plutocracy That Created the American Middle Class, 1900–1970* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012).
10. Pizzigati; Rick Rowley dir., *The Fourth World War*, (Big Noise Films, 2003), DVD; Velcrow Ripper, dir., *Occupy Love*, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-QXiW4JBzE-&t=1417s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-QXiW4JBzE-&v=6-QXiW4JBzE-&t=1417s); and Jack Rasmus, *Epic Recession: Prelude to Global Depression* (London: Pluto Press: 2010).
11. Rowley, *The Fourth World War*; and Ripper, *Occupy Love*.
12. Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis* (New York, Harper Colophon: 1974), 21; and David Snow and Robert Benford, "Ideology, Frame Resonance and Participant Mobilization," *International Social Movement Research* 1 no. 1 (1998): 197–217.
13. Goffman; and Snow and Benford.
14. Martin, "Critical Political Economy."
15. Chris Dixon, *Another Politics: Talking Across Today's Transformative Movements* (Oakland, University of California Press: 2014).
16. Vice News, "Charlottesville: Race and Terror – VICE News Tonight (HBO)," YouTube video, 22:04, August 14, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P54sP0Nlmgg>.
17. Snow and Benford, "Ideology, Frame Resonance and Participant Mobilization," 197–217.
18. Snow and Benford.
19. Irena Salina, dir., *Flow: For Love of Water*, (Group Entertainment and Steven Starr Productions, 2008), DVD.
20. David Snow et al., "Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation," *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 4 (1986): 464–81.
21. Snow et al.
22. Dixon, *Another Politics*, 62–3; Dixon, 127–37, 132–7, 224–5.
23. Jay P. Weismuller, "Social Movements and Free Riders: Examining resource mobilization theory through the Bolivian Water War," *The Macalester Review* 2, no. 2(2012), <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1030&context=macreview>.
24. Weismuller, 5.
25. Dixon, *Another Politics*, 90–3, 170–1, 185–98, 215–6, 228–9.
26. Dixon, 116–8, 127–37, 139–40.
27. Dixon, 117–8.
28. Dixon, 109–24.
29. Dixon, 125–37, 138–53, 208–10.
30. Dixon, 83.
31. Dixon, 99–102.
32. Dixon, 102–5.
33. Dixon, 85–8.
34. Dixon, 85–8.
35. Dixon, 88–95.
36. Dixon, 146–52, 160–5, 175–98.
37. Ripper, *Occupy Love*.
38. Jesse Graham et al., "Moral Foundations Theory: The Pragmatic Validity of Moral Pluralism," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 47 (2013).
39. Graham et al., 21; and Jonathan Haidt, Jesse Graham, and Craig Joseph, "Above and Below Left-Right: Ideological Narratives and Moral Foundations," *Psychological Inquiry* 20, no. 2–3 (2009): 110–9.
40. Vice News, "Charlottesville: Race and Terror."
41. Vice News, "Charlottesville: Race and Terror."
42. Al Jazeera, "Elsipogtog: The Fire Over Water," Documentary, 24:56, December 6, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/faultlines/2013/12/elsipogtog-fire-over-water-20131249130589515.html>.
43. Al Jazeera, "Elsipogtog: The Fire Over Water."