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SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

AN INTRODUCTION

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THE SYMBOLIC DIMENSION OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

On November 6, 2000, *Business Week* devoted a special section to global justice campaigns. It wrote: “Many of the radicals leading the protests may be on the political fringe. But they have helped to kick start a profound rethinking about globalization among governments, mainstream economists, and corporations that, until recently, was carried on mostly in obscure think-tanks and academic seminars” (quoted in Bircham and Charlton 2001: 390). At the World Economic Forum in Davos, an annual meeting of the great and the good, finance guru George Soros said: “This protest movement is plugging into something that is widely felt. . . . by their disruption they have created a concern that was not there before” (ibid.).

These statements reflect dramatic changes in both the public visibility of “globalization” as an issue, and attitudes toward it. Until the 1990s, for public opinion worldwide and for many political actors, both in the institutions and at the grassroots, globalization was still a largely meaningless word. A decade later, it had become the key concept for anybody discussing social and political change.

The recent growth of the relevance of globalization in public discourse and the media (Andretta, della Porta, Mosca, and Reiter 2002: ch. 1) has seen an increasing number of actors – intellectuals, public agencies, private corporations, religious leaders, political activists, national and international nongovernmental organizations – attempting to define it, to stress the risks attached to it, as well as to highlight its promises (Nederveen Pieterse 2000; Ayres 2004). Although they are increasingly acknowledging its attendant problems, transnational business actors and international financial institutions are still the most unconditional supporters of globalization (Anheier, Glasius, and Kaldor 2001: 9–10). Deregulation and the resulting free trade of capital and goods are portrayed as the necessary pre-

conditions for the start of sustained development processes outside the Western world. Far from only protecting powerful interests, economic globalization will generate diffuse well-being among the majority of the world population, thus also facilitating the spread of democratic practices. Accordingly, restrictions on financial and goods trade should be vehemently opposed, and major economic powers are fully justified in playing an active political role, including military action, in those countries where the freedom of markets and access to key resources is under threat.

Critics of neoliberal globalization can by no means be reduced to the so-called antiglobalization movement, or movement for a globalization from below. They also include to a varying extent transnational institutions and agencies, such as the FAO or UNESCO, skeptical experts, mainstream media, churches, etc. However, even those civil-society actors most frequently associated with the movement (radical activist networks, religious organizations, industrial and farmers' unions, community activists, environmental groups, left-wing political parties) still define the issue and represent the main goals and strategies of the movement in very different ways. In its identification of globalization as an overarching theme, this movement has been able to link together many other specific issues and concerns: questions of environmental preservation and social justice; questions of workers' rights in developed countries and rights of developing countries to obtain easier access to Northern markets, an outcome that the mix of protectionist policies and nationalism among the Northern labor movement had made difficult to achieve in the recent past; equilibrium between local community rights and traditions and aspirations to global, universalistic cultures.

There are several points worth noting in the above example. First, issues do not have an independent life outside of people's efforts to characterize them as such. Many of the problems that the antiglobalization movement faces nowadays were already there well before the word "globalization" started circulating (Tilly 2004a; Wallerstein 1974, 2004). Hunger and disease in non-Western countries, war, imperialism, and colonialism had been tackled by sustained collective action innumerable times in the postwar world, not to mention earlier cases such as the human rights and antislavery movements, or nationalistic movements with a transnational basis (Hobsbawm 1994: ch. 15; D'Anjou 1996; Hanagan 1998b). That they now come under the heading of globalization cannot be explained exclusively by the growing interdependence between nation-states and supranational bodies. One also has to look at how social actors have elaborated definitions of those issues that link them to a broader process, called globalization.

Second, the emergence of issues is not an obvious process. In contrast, it originates from sustained symbolic and cultural conflict between different actors. At one level, globalization becomes either a catchword to synthesize all the positives and gains one can get from the removal of commercial barriers and the global triumph of the free market; or a catchword for all the evils, misery, and exploitation that total dominance by market forces can generate. At another level, however, there are substantive differences in ways that actors define globalization despite being broadly favorable or critical of it. Even pro-market forces express different degrees of support; critics may oppose globalization in its entirety – as happens, say, among right-wing nationalist organizations – or rather favor a democratic, grassroots version of it.

Third, movements can also be regarded as the expression of specific values. Social movements not only aim at specific policy changes or the replacement of specific political elites, but at broader transformations in societal priorities, in the basic mechanisms through which a society operates. Within the new global movement we find the strong influence of values related to both the historical experience of the left and to religious experience. However, the question remains, what factors matter most? Is it values that shape social movement activity? Or is it instead movement actors' capacity to represent their concerns in ways that motivate people to act and broaden support for their cause? This dilemma reflects two different views of the relationship between culture and collective action.

Historically, the role of culture in collective action has been subsumed under the heading of ideology. Ideology is usually conceived as “a relatively stable and coherent set of values, beliefs, and goals associated with a movement or a broader, encompassing social entity, [. . .] assumed to provide the rationale for defending or challenging various social arrangements and conditions” (Snow 2004: 396). Think, e.g., of the debates between Marxist thinkers and political leaders arguing that culture – in particular, revolutionary culture – would stem from the development of productive forces and the appropriate material conditions; and those assigning ideology a more active role in encouraging activists and masses to act (e.g. Gramsci). Think also of the attention paid by social psychologists in the 1950s or 1960s to personalities attracted to ideological thinking (e.g. Kornhauser 1959; for a discussion see Snow 2004: 381).

The last few years have seen a deepening of the discussion of the role of culture in social movements. The broad framework is provided by the debate on structure and agency (Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Giddens 1984; Emirbayer and Mische 1988): social actors act in the context of structural constraints, which not only have to do with material resources but also with cultural ones. Actors' interpretations of their situation, their preconceptions, their implicit assumptions about social life and its guiding principles, about what is worthy or unworthy, all drastically constrain their capacity to act and the range of their options. At the same

time, through action, agents also try – and sometimes succeed – in modifying the cultural structures in which they are embedded. Social agency is indeed at the same time oriented on the reproduction of its constraining structures, and the creation of new ones. This duplicity can be found even in the experience of social movements, which by definition should be the most oriented towards change (Sewell 1992; Crossley 2002; Livesay 2003).

This debate has also brought about a reassessment of the role and characteristics of ideology. Although the term has remained popular over the years (Turner and Killian 1987; Oliver and Johnston 2000; Zald 2000), it has come under growing criticism since the 1980s, for implying unrealistic levels of ideological coherence and integration, of ideological proximity among social movement participants, of correlation between ideas and behavior (see Snow 2004: 396 ff. for a summary; Melucci 1989, 1996 for a classic version of this critique).

The major critique has probably been that this notion of ideology collapses two quite different aspects of culture: values and the interpretative tools – habits, memories, prejudices, mental schemata, predispositions, common wisdom, practical knowledge, etc. – that enable people to make sense of their world (Swidler 1986). The two aspects do not necessarily operate in the same direction. For example, those who mobilize most readily and intensely are not necessarily those with the strongest values but those whose interpretation of the situation provides a clear rationale for acting (in terms of their perception not only of the opportunities to act, but also of the available alternatives or of the emotional pressure exerted on them). In what follows we address these two aspects separately, starting with values.

3.1 Culture and Action: The Role of Values

We may think of social action as driven largely by the fundamental principles with which actors identify. According to this perspective, values will influence how actors define specific goals, and identify strategies which are both efficient and morally acceptable. Moreover, values will provide the motivations necessary to sustain the costs of action. The more intense one's socialization to a particular vision of the world, the stronger the impetus to act. The characteristics of a given system of values will shape the components of action.

How is this model articulated in the case of collective action in movements? How, in other words, is it possible to describe values as the central explanatory variable in the case of actions which, by definition, call into question at least some of the (culturally legitimized) assets of power in a given society? On the one hand, we can relate collective action to lack of social integration in the system, or, alternatively, to the inability of the system to reproduce and reinforce its fundamental values. The tradition of research into movements prior to the

1960s, which largely focused on revolutionary movements of the right and the left in the first half of the century, paid great attention to interpretations of this type (Kornhauser 1959). Nowadays, according to this perspective, the emergence of global justice movements could be interpreted as evidence of the failure of society to instill free-market values among its members, most notably the younger generation. Not infrequently, for instance, schools are blamed by business for their hostility towards entrepreneurial culture, and neoliberal politicians (including recent recruits like Tony Blair: Beck 1999) have often criticized schools on the very same ground.

On the other hand, we could also interpret collective action as evidence of the emergence of trends towards social reintegration rather than disintegration; as proof, in other words, of the formation and consolidation of new value systems. From this point of view, the success of global justice activism could be linked to the spread of new values, combining in equal measure attention to social justice, human rights, environmental preservation. In recent times, the link between the emergence of new conflicts and the value dimension has been stressed with considerable force in the context of various forms of “new politics,” connected with environmental issues, feminism, peace, and civil rights (Dalton 1988; Kriesi 1993: 60 ff.; Rohrschneider 1988; Norris 2002). In the most ambitious formulation of this model, the rise of “new” political movements from the 1970s onwards is associated with more general processes of value change (Inglehart 1977, 1990a, 1990b; Clark and Inglehart 1998). Inglehart’s argument is based on two assumptions. According to what he defines as the “scarcity hypothesis” (Inglehart 1990a: 56), there is a hierarchy of needs, and needs of a higher order (relating, for example, to the intellectual and personal growth of the individual) are conceivable only when those of a lower order (relating, for example, to physical survival) have been satisfied. Moreover, according to the “socialization hypothesis” (Inglehart 1990a: 56), there is a continuity in adult life which leaves broadly unaltered both the fundamental principles and the order of priorities established in the formative years leading to maturity.

The experiences and lifestyles of those born in the West in the period following the Second World War, and who became adults in the 1960s or later, have been very different from those of preceding generations. In particular, they have enjoyed unprecedented levels of affluence, easier access to higher education, and reduced exposure to the risks of war. In Inglehart’s view, this situation is likely to produce conditions which are particularly favorable to changes in needs and basic orientations. In particular, a gradual weakening of the system of “material” values and their replacement by “postmaterial” values is likely to set in. While the former reflects concerns relating to economic well-being and personal and collective security, the latter are oriented, rather, towards the affirmation of expressive needs. They would, in other words, prioritize individual achievement

in private, and an expansion of freedom of expression, democratic participation, and self-government in the public domain.

In order to understand fully this phenomenon, it seems essential to characterize the 1960s as one of those rare moments in history which produced the conditions for a radical change in perspective. From this standpoint, one might argue that social transformations and events of particular relevance and impact, such as the fading away of the Cold War and generalized economic growth, produced an irreversible change in conceptions of social and political life, and that a new generation¹ of citizens (and, in many cases, of militant politicians) was formed. It would thus be possible to speak of a 1960s generation, just as one speaks of generations when referring to the events of 1848, of the post-Victorian era, or of the Great Depression of the 1920s and 1930s (Braungart and Braungart 1986: 217; Jamison and Eyerman 1994). The 1960s generation would have passed on – at least in part – these new conceptualizations to younger groups, even though political contexts subsequently differed greatly.²

The emergence of postmaterial values has been documented by an impressive amount of survey data collected in the USA and in key European countries from the beginning of the 1970s.³ Since then, the gap between the number of people holding materialist values (i.e., in the basic formulation of the survey questionnaires, identifying “maintaining order in the nation” and “fighting rising prices” as their top policy priorities out of a list of four) and those holding postmaterialist values (i.e., assigning priority to “giving people more say in important government decisions” and “protecting freedom of speech”) has narrowed substantially, even though materialists are still in the majority. Furthermore, the younger cohorts of the population have been shown to be consistently more sensitive to postmaterialist values than older cohorts (Inglehart 1990b: 75).

The empirical evidence relating to value change has generated a notable number of analyses of the new politics, the emergence of green parties, and the characteristics of activists and supporters of new movements (see e.g. Rohrschneider 1988, 1993b; Dalton 1988, 1994). They have demonstrated that those with postmaterial values are strongly disposed to support new forms of collective action or to take part in some way in protest activities (Inglehart 1990b). In particular, it has been suggested the situation has led to the development of new cleavages and the related processes of political realignment along materialist vs. postmaterialist lines (Dalton 1988; Jennings et al. 1990).

Inglehart's theses have provoked considerable debate. Suggestions that the growth of postmaterialist values might not be a sign of profound change but rather a transitory phenomenon, the consequence of an unrepeatable historical conjunction such as that which took place in the 1960s, have been dismissed by data showing that generational replacement actually results in a steady increase of postmaterialists among Western – and not only Western – publics (Abramson

and Inglehart 1992; Inglehart 1990b; de Graaf and Evans 1996; Inglehart 1997, 1999; Inglehart and Baker 2000; Inglehart and Norris 2003).

The link between postmaterialist orientations and new social movements has also been questioned. Hostility towards the politics of “law and order” is certainly a distinctive characteristic of these movements. They have certainly mobilized on a number of occasions in support of freedom of expression and direct democracy. But they have equally promoted other mobilizations (for example against war, nuclear energy, or environmental pollution) which is difficult to consider independently from preoccupations with personal and collective security, or, in other words, from purely “materialist” concerns (Brooks and Manza 1994: 558–63).

Likewise, the value distance between the materialist and the postmaterialist camp might be at least partially an outcome of the way questions are posed, as they require people to choose between items measuring one or the other basic orientation.⁴ When the possibility of a co-existence of the two value orientations is taken into account, more complex configurations may emerge. For example, in their study of grassroots activists in the Greater Vancouver area, Carroll and Ratner (1996) found that a political-economy representation of social conflict – broadly inspired by “materialist” concerns – often co-existed with a representation emphasizing the importance of identity struggles that was closer to a “postmaterialist” point of view. Moreover, an exclusive focus on the materialist vs. postmaterialist distinction might somewhat conceal another important distinction, opposing authoritarian and libertarian attitudes, which does not overlap with the former (Steel et al. 1992). Despite a substantial correlation between postmaterialism and support for new movements, the quota of postmaterialists embracing authoritarian, right-wing values (for example, opposing welfare spending, or advocating authoritarian policies of nature protection) is far from insignificant (Steel et al. 1992: 350–1; Middendorp 1992; Inglehart 1997: 48).

It is also necessary to ask to what extent postmaterialism can be said to represent the basis of a new political divide. In this context, it is important to take account of the relationship between the materialist–postmaterialist dimension and the more general identification with left and right. Given the tendency of new social movements to identify themselves with the left, the materialist–postmaterialist split might be said to be simply a reworking of the left–right division, thus denying the existence of new and different political perspectives. As yet, there is no conclusive evidence to support or refute this hypothesis. It is certainly the case that both party supporters and trade unionists in the “old” left tend to be postmaterialists, as do new left and new movement activists and sympathizers (Inglehart 1990a: ch. 11; 1990b: 90).

On the other hand, it is far from clear what the left–right dimension refers to in strict terms. At the very minimum, it can be deconstructed into two independent dimensions, one measuring orientations to socioeconomic issues, the

other, orientations to libertarian versus authoritarian attitudes. Postmaterialism has sometimes been found to be a poor predictor of both types of orientations (Middendorp 1992; see also Kriesi 1993). With regard to the relationship between general left orientations and movements, it is only certain sectors of the left – from the noncommunist tradition – which seem to be clearly sympathetic to the new movements (Inglehart 1990a: ch. 11). Furthermore, while a generic identification with the left provides an adequate explanation for interest in the issues raised by the new movements, postmaterialism offers a better explanation of the willingness of individuals to participate in these movements (1990a). One might also argue that, rather than postmaterialism being the basis for a new political cleavage, the opposite interpretation could well be true. In other words, where a new cleavage has emerged for specific historical reasons (like in Germany, where the Greens have become a major political player), then this may well have been organized around the materialist vs. postmaterialist divide; where, however, this has not been the case (for example, in the USA), then postmaterialist values may not be associated with any specific political faction (Trump 1991).

Doubts about the relationship between movements and postmaterialism have been reinforced in recent years by two very different developments. On the one hand, the emergence of the antiglobalization movement has raised doubts about the link between postmaterialism and progressive politics. Admittedly, the shortage of surveys explicitly measuring attitudes towards this movement, and/or participation in it, renders it difficult to compare it with the new social movements. It is certainly true that a certain degree of overlap exists when it comes to mobilizations on peace/environmental/human rights issues. On such issues, the correlation to postmaterialism is well demonstrated (Norris 2002). And it is also true that surveys conducted among participants in major gatherings such as Genoa or the Florence European Social Forum suggest that many respondents (about 20 percent) refuse to locate themselves on the left–right cleavage. At the same time, however, global justice movements also address issues that are clearly materialist, related to basic working and living conditions, although they are often defined in a way which combines material interests with issues of sustainability, environmental protection, and the like. Moreover, the great majority of those who still regard the left–right distinction as meaningful identify with the left of the political spectrum: about 25 percent of activists interviewed at the European Social Forum in Florence located themselves on the extreme left side of the left–right continuum and 50 percent at the left, with an additional 10 percent choosing the center-left (della Porta, Andretta, Mosca, and Reiter 2005). Finally, while available data (Inglehart 1997; Norris 1999) suggest a positive relation between postmaterialism and democracy in both old and new democracies, they also suggest that postmaterialists are in favor of open global markets (again, this evidence is difficult to interpret as it could mean both a democratic and nondemocratic globalization).

The last few years have also brought about a totally different example of the link between values and collective action. Whereas the discussion had focused on values (in particular, value change) and participatory democratic politics, the reemergence of ethnic and tribal conflicts in many areas of the world, and most particularly the spread of fundamentalism (well before September 11 and not restricted to Islam: Moaddel 2002; Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule 2003; Woodberry and Smith 1998), has set a dramatically different intellectual agenda. Samuel Huntington's (1993, 1996) well-known "clash of civilization" thesis and cognate arguments, suggesting a fundamental conflict between Islam and the West, have assigned values a very different role than the one implied by postmaterialist theorists. They propose a view of social movements as deeply embedded in strongly held sets of values, which represent the stake for fundamental conflicts, susceptible of orienting future relations between major areas of the world.

However, empirical tests of this thesis suggest a more complex picture: contrary to expectations, Norris and Inglehart (2002) found attitudes towards democracy to be very similar in the two camps; but they also found deep and irreconcilable differences in the definition of private lifestyles, especially in gender relations and sexual freedom. This holds true despite the substantial presence of conservative Christian values in important Western countries, most notably the United States (Woodberry and Smith 1998). Norris and Inglehart's conclusion that "The central values separating Islam and the West revolve far more centrally around Eros than Demos" (2002: 3) brings further support to the argument of a gradual shift in priorities from "public politics" to "personal politics," and is not necessarily in contradiction with arguments about post-materialist values in the West.

A more fundamental objection to the theory of value change addresses the relationship between values and action. If people's values can explain their fundamental sensitivity to particular questions and problems, their impact need not necessarily go beyond this level. In his study of civil rights activists in the US in the 1960s, McAdam (1986), for instance, found that prospective activists' commitment to values of freedom and equality was a poor predictor of their actual participation. Looking at survey data from several west European countries, Fuchs and Rucht (1994) found no correlation between broad support for environmentalism and participation. The decision to act – and, specifically, to act collectively – depends not only on basic internalized principles and/or attitudes but on a complex evaluation of the opportunities and constraints for action. Values are articulated through specific goals and are associated with strategies of appropriate conduct. It is thus necessary to interpret the external situation as favorable to action, or at least as requiring the mobilization of the individual, rather than withdrawal or conformity. And it is essential to be able to transform individual values into collective ones, identifying elements of convergence and solidarity with others sharing the same values (Klandermans 1988; Melucci 1989, 1996; Gamson 1992a).

In other words, it is necessary to have a view of reality which links the values domain with the strategic and solidaristic domain in a coherent fashion. Attention must also be paid both to the cognitive dimension of action, as we shall do in the following sections of this chapter, and to the relationship between action and collective identity – a theme which we consider in the next chapter.

3.2 Culture and Action: The Cognitive Perspective

3.2.1 Collective action as cognitive praxis

The idea that culture, and specifically its impact on collective action, can be reduced to values has been controversial for quite some time. In particular, it has been observed that “culture influences action not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented, but by shaping a repertoire or ‘tool kit’ of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct ‘strategies of action’” (Swidler 1986: 273). That is to say, culture provides the cognitive apparatus which people need to orient themselves in the world. This apparatus consists of a multiplicity of cultural and ideational elements which include beliefs, ceremonies, artistic forms, and informal practices such as language, conversation, stories, daily rituals (Swidler 1986: 273). The content of cultural models, of which values are a key component, is of secondary importance here in relation to the vision of culture as a set of instruments that social actors use to make sense of their own life experiences (see also Eyerman and Jamison 1991).

In relation to the study of collective action, this standpoint allows us to consider problems which an analysis focusing exclusively on values would have neglected. It helps us to reflect on why systems of analogous values are, in certain circumstances, able to support collective action but fail to provide adequate motivation in others. For example, the mobilizing capacity of environmental and anti-nuclear movements was significantly higher in Germany than in France in the 1980s, despite the levels of postmaterialism being fairly similar in the two countries. Second, the flexibility and skills of actors in adapting to different environmental conditions emerge very clearly. An important precondition for the success of movements lies in their activists’ ability to reformulate their own values and motivations in order to adapt them in the most efficient manner to the specific orientations of the sectors of public opinion which they wish to mobilize (Snow et al. 1986; Tarrow 1994). In the context of this need for flexibility and adaptability, strong identification with certain norms and values can even represent an obstacle to actors’ freedom, limiting their capacity for action (Kertzer 1988; Swidler 1986; Lofland 1995).

Therefore, it is always possible to interpret the experience of social movements as the unceasing production and reproduction of cultural codes (Melucci