

ONE

New Social Movements

Introduction to Part 1

"It is hard to see," writes Alain Touraine of contemporary collective action, "what unifies all these numerous conflicts that do not invoke some central values, do not combat a dominant power, but seek only to modify some relations of power or some specific decision-making systems."¹ Indeed, it has become the project of many students of social movements to find this hard-to-see unity: to make sense of "new" movements and conflicts—from feminism to ecology—that seem to share characteristics while differing in their targets. European theorists generally have seen that these movements share both a middle-class base and a shift of focal activity from "the state" to "civil society." The projects in the next two chapters attempt to challenge and refine thinking on new social movements by examining their dynamics in the concrete. Both Josepha Schiffman and Joshua Gamson examine movements categorized as "new"; both find a need to delineate more clearly particular phenomena within the greater phenomenon of new movement types, turning to the operation of power in "micro," face-to-face contexts to do so.

Schiffman begins her comparative study of two groups within the peace movement—Bay Area Peace Test (BAPT) and Beyond War (BW)—by pointing to their differences. How, she asks, do we get such different responses to the same threat? Gamson opens his study of San Francisco's ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) by pointing to its distinctive theatrical style. Why do we find activists fighting AIDS at baseball games? Why and how does contemporary activism operate in the cultural sphere? These questions do not appear to be adequately addressed by writings on new social movements. Schiffman sees a need to delineate and explain differences between new movements. Gamson

suggests that what is “new” in these movements, in particular how they operate in “civil society” and the “cultural sphere,” is too vaguely conceived. The studies thus attempt to ground what theory leaves blurry.

Schiffman and Gamson find the operation of power in their sites particularly striking. In ACT UP, Gamson finds, actions are often involved in symbolic inversions that attempt to replace dominant representations of people with AIDS with alternative ones. Moreover, the actions that express gay identity—an action type familiar in contemporary movements—are attempts to use labels of abnormality against the process of labeling itself. It is this process of stigmatization, seen as lethal in the AIDS epidemic, to which ACT UP in large part responds: a new form of domination in which power is carried not only by state institutions but also by everyday interactions, through the delineation of the abnormal from the normal.

Schiffman finds different notions of power—neither of which is chiefly concerned with macro-level, state power—at the heart of the different strategies of BAPT and BW. The Peace Test, while in part directing itself to state power, is focused mainly on the pervasive operation of power. Much of its action focuses on avoiding duplication of the oppressive relations against which it is fighting, and on building an alternative power structure within the group (through, for example, consensus process and “empowerment” activities). Beyond War operates on the notion that power differences are attitudinal problems and can be bridged through clear communication, an empathetic understanding of the unity of all life. Acting on this notion, it attempts to circumvent power dynamics by transforming the consciousness of individuals.

This shift in the attention within movements from vertical (state and institutional) to horizontal (person-to-person) power, the studies suggest, is crucial in understanding contemporary movements. Moreover, it helps to make sense of the odd place of the “enemy” in many contemporary movements: enemies are often difficult for these groups to clearly articulate or for an observer to infer. In BW there is a near rejection of the very concept of enemy, in BAPT a focus on the community itself (and, at times, on an abstract enemy, the “machine”). These characteristics, Schiffman suggests, can be traced to the conceptions of power under which the groups operate. ACT UP, while targeting institutional “enemies” such as the government and the medical establishment, is largely involved in activities aimed at an amorphous enemy—American society. Gamson suggests that this emphasis can be traced to domination through normalization, in which the enemy is in fact ubiquitous and invisible.

This shift to the micro operations of power, finally, helps clarify the relationship between contemporary social movements and the state. Gamson sees state institutions and actors pulling back from the stigmatization process, leaving the process itself, disembodied and less visible, the target of activity. Schiffman sees the attention of peace movement activists largely diverted from the state’s involvement in nuclear issues—a very direct and visible involvement—to power relations and communication within the groups themselves. Both suggest that the fact that what unifies contemporary movements may be “hard to see” is perhaps a deeper and more literal insight than it first appears: that looking at the operation of less visible power makes the dynamics of new social movements more visible.

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