

Impact of media on global social movements politics essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In this paper my aim would be to bring forth various views and theories of “social movements” and explore the evolution of global social movements in the recent past. In the later part of my paper I would be discussing the role of mass media in global social movements and would also include the concept of “new media” and contemporary social networks in the cyber space and their impact on global social movements. But first I would like to start with a few definitions and views on global social movements by eminent scholars and intellectuals.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The term “social movements” was introduced in 1850 by the German Sociologist ‘Lorenz von Stein’ in his book “History of the French Social Movement from 1789 to the Present”. Since then, the term has taken different meanings and interpretations. Charles Tilly defines social movements as, “a series of contentious performances, displays and campaigns by which ordinary people made collective claims on others”[1]. For Tilly, “social movements are a major vehicle for ordinary people’s participation in public politics”. Sidney Tarrow defines a social movement as, “collective challenges to elites, authorities, other groups or cultural codes by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interactions with elites, opponents and authorities”[2]. Scholars like Escobar see social movements as “sources of alternatives, hopes and theories of how the world can be made differently”[3]. Bourdieu’s argument on social movements is that, “it’s not the market, as it’s tried to make us believe today, but the social movement, which has ‘civilized’ the market economy while largely contributing to its efficacy”[4]. Touraine, on the other hand,

contends that “ social movements are not positive or negative agents of history, of modernization, or of the liberalization of mankind. They act in a given type of social production and organization”[5]. His views differ from the romanticisers of social movements and from those who define a social action mainly in terms of “ effectiveness in bringing about social change or resistance, to varying degrees”, like McAdam and Snow[6]. Social movements are also seen as organizational and political opportunities by some and as effects as well as results of power structures, class struggles and identity politics by others. Some like Rucht find the value by combining them and arguing that “ a social movement exists to the extent that the following qualities are co-present: In structural terms, social movements are networks of groups and/or organizations; regarding their aims, they are attempts to fundamentally change society (including power structures and basic values) or to resist such changes”[7].

Global social movements have intensified in recent years; some of these movements contest not only the actual nature and consequences of current global socioeconomic relations but also the very foundation governing them. One of the reasons may be the global economic and technological integration which has consistently been disarming the traditional welfare function of the state and in turn generating increased misery, inequalities and conflicts. This has provided grounds for citizens and civil society groups of diverse origins to express their resentment and advance claims in increased numbers. There has been an emergence and consolidation of ‘ global civil society’ which is believed to be bigger and wider, offering a positive response, even counterweight, to a narrow notion that linked

globalization to economic processes alone. I would like to begin my discussion on GSMs with some theories relating to social movements.

THEORIES OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT

Typically, European social movement theorists tended to view contentious collective action through a Marxian lens, proffering structural analyses to varying degrees. However, a paradigm shift occurred which delineated ‘old’ social movement theory (class based) from ‘new’ social movement theory (culture based). I would discuss some theories relating to social movements like collective behaviour theory, resource mobilisation theory, political process theory, social constructionist theory, new social movement theory and the networks theory.

Collective Behaviour Theory

This theory states that social movements differ a little from other group manifestations, such as panics, crowds and crazes. Generally, this theory advanced the notion that social movements were “little more than the most well-organized and self-conscious part of an archipelago of ‘emergent’ phenomena, ranging from fads and rumours, to collective enthusiasm, riots, movements and revolutions”[8]. There have been different approaches to this theory. Beginning with Symbolic interactionism which is a variant of classic collective behaviour theory wherein creative agency triumphs over structural determination, and the creation and interpretation of meaning are the key. This model views collective behaviour as the spontaneous development of norms and organization that contest the status quo, and provoke individual reactions to social disintegration, which then form into a general, collective response. Another version of collective behaviour theory <https://assignbuster.com/impact-of-media-on-global-social-movements-politics-essay/>

parallels the overarching theoretical paradigm of structural-functionalism in an attempt to link broad, structural factors to specific occasions of collective behaviour unfolding in several necessary stages like, “ structural conduciveness, structural strain, generalized beliefs that provide meaning and motivation and events or actions that catalyse collective behaviour; physical mobilization of actors; and the absence or suspension of social control”[9]. The third approach identifies Relative deprivation as the motivating force behind collective action represents another variant of classic collective behaviour theory. In sum, this concept stipulates that a group decides to act collectively when people judge themselves as lacking certain resources in relation to another group.

Resource Mobilization Theory

The demise of the collective behaviour paradigm came about during the tumultuous 1960s with the advent of “ new social movements”. According to McAdam[10], “ theorizing social movements as a response to social strain was problematic in that it did not take the larger political context into consideration. In assigning causation of social movements to individual discontent, collective behaviour was considered abnormal and apolitical”. Resource mobilization theory arose during the 1970s as a response to the shortcomings of collective behaviour theory. It held that in contentious collective action, passion gave way to rational calculation, and the collective good acquiesced to individual gain as mobilizing factors. Thus, “ activism relied on the ability of social movements to muster resources and engage in planned, rational action”[11]. In this analysis, activists were not considered “ under the sway of sentiments, emotions, and ideologies that guided his or

her action”; rather, collective behaviour “ should be understood in terms of the logic of costs and benefits as well as opportunities for action” Proponents of this model argued that increased personal resources, the professionalization of activism and the availability of external financial support could adequately account for contentious collective action. The focus, therefore, was on resource aggregation, and facilitation by social movement organizations (SMOs), formal or professional organizations that identify their goals with those of a social movement. In contrast to collective behaviour theory, which focused on why collective action occurred, resource mobilization theory attempted to answer the persistent question of how social movements organized and mobilized.

Political Process Theory

The political process model developed as an alternative to resource mobilization theory. Here, “ the success or failure of social movements depended on political opportunities created by ruptures in the institutional structure and the ideology of power-holders”[12]. Three essential components comprise this theory. The first demarks the political structure as an external factor not under the direct control of challengers, but critical to a movement’s success. The second is an internal factor: the organizational strength of activists, the product of interaction between movement members, leaders and incentives. The final component is McAdam’s[13]“ cognitive liberation”, or a change in group consciousness “ whereby potential protesters see the existing social order not only as illegitimate, but also as subject to change through their own direct efforts”[14]. Thus, “ revolutions owe less to the efforts of insurgents than to the work of systemic

crises which render the existing regime weak and vulnerable to challenge from virtually any quarter”.

Social Constructionist Theory

Social constructionism approaches collective action “ as an interactive, symbolically defined and negotiated process among participants, opponents and bystanders”[15]. Central to this theory is, “ the concept is of framing, which describes how activists make sense of their social worlds”[16]. Frames constitute shared understandings and identities that generate the trust and cooperation amongst activists necessary for collective action. In the context of social movements, “ frames dignify discontent, identify grievances and assemble the grievances of various groups”[17]. Grievances are framed in three ways. Diagnostic framing identifies a problem as well as a target for action; and prognostic framing suggests solutions, including strategies and tactics specific to the target. Together, they mobilize consensus, creating a base from which movements may recruit; however, collective action is not the necessary outcome of this process. In order for people to act contentiously, they must have compelling reasons to do so. Thus, “ motivational framing provides inspiration and rationale for action”[18].

New Social Movement Theory

“ NSM theorists stressed that social transformation is mediated through culture as well as politics narrowly defined, that the personal and the cultural are as politically real as, and are not reducible to, power struggles in the state and economy”[19]. As Melucci, observes, “ Conflicts move from the economic-industrial system to the cultural sphere. They focus on personal identity, the time and space of life, and the motivation and codes of daily

<https://assignbuster.com/impact-of-media-on-global-social-movements-politics-essay/>

behaviour”[20]. That is to say, activists in new social movements turned their gaze inward, focusing on issues as they affected their personal lives, and pursuing social change through politicizing culture.

Networks Theory

The concept of networks helps to address the division created by a narrow focus on identity, as mediated through cultural analysis, in social movement theory. According to Castells, “ New information technologies, by transforming the processes of information processing, act upon all domains of human activity, and make it possible to establish endless connections between different domains, as well as between elements and agents of such activities”[21]. Castells observes that, “ As people organized meaning around who they were, rather than what they did, the process of globalization relied on increasingly integrated “ networks of instrumental exchange”[22]. According to Appadurai, “ the result of globalized communication and mass migration is the creation of diasporic public spheres, phenomena that confound theories that depend on the continued salience of the nation-state as the key arbiter of important social changes”[23]. The electronic revolution has facilitated the globalization of capitalism; it has also enabled the globalization of protest, as Dyer-Witford[24]observes: “ New information technologies therefore appear not just as instruments for the circulation of commodities, but simultaneously as channels for the circulation of struggles”. Thus, social movements become increasingly global both in target and in form. The movements that oppose corporate globalization, like the Zapatistas and the Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement (ACGM), are prime examples of network-based

social movements. My further discussions would primarily be based on this theory of networks in social movements with an emphasis on the rise of social networks in GSMs and their role in felicitating them.

MEDIA AND GSMs

In this part of my paper I would give a brief evolution of media as a tool for social change and would also discuss the use of ICTs in GSMs. I would give some examples of “ social media” and would conclude this part with views of authors and scholars who are divided on the positive and negative role of media in social movements.

MEDIA FOR CHANGE

TRADITIONAL MEDIA

Soon after the end of World War II the importance of mass media like newspapers, radio, cinema and television as accelerators in spreading ideas about progress and development began to be recognised. There are numerous examples in history where movements have been influenced by media. The issues at that time were more political than social but slowly, the same process was followed in carrying out social movements. It was already well documented how during War times radios and newspapers were used along with televisions to create a ‘ public sphere’ where people shared ideas and issues of common interest in a democracy. How leaders through their mesmerising speeches were able to instil patriotic feeling in their countrymen. These established norms gave way to the use of mass media in different social movements. In the Indian context one can find the use of such means during the Green Revolution, Family planning Communications.

In Latin America, Paulo Freire (1971) used it for adult literacy programmes. Even with the advent of the ICTs one can still find that the maximum amount of information dissemination in social movements, even today, is done through these means. May it be an environmental campaign or anti-corruption campaign, this mode still remains a dominant player in social change.

NEW MEDIA: INTERNET

The battles of Seattle, Washington, Prague and Genoa, with an unforeseen mixture of nationalities and movements, became world news. Interestingly, the new media seemed to play a crucial role in the organization of these global-protests. Internet has been widely used as a tool for social change and social movements in the recent past. I will illustrate some popular examples corroborating my statement.

Zapatistas Movement

Beginning in 1994, the Zapatistas used the Internet to turn a local dispute over land in Chiapas, Mexico into an international debate over the ill effects of corporate globalization. They incorporated their localized concerns over the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) into an international agenda opposed to global economic policies that usurp national political sovereignty and recolonize debtor nations. The Zapatistas and their supporters worldwide thus fashioned an ideology that rejected neoliberalism, “ which for them refers less to policy or theory and more directly to degrading environmental conditions and escalating human rights abuses”[25]. Thus, they used the Internet to weave “ a new electronic fabric

of struggle”[26]to rally support for their revolution throughout Mexico and across the globe.

The Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement

The Anti-Corporate Globalization movement built on the foundations laid by the Zapatistas, using the Internet to connect with social justice activists around the world, to serve as a forum for education and discussion, and to disseminate information unavailable in the corporate mainstream press. The Internet was also critical in the logistical organization of the massive demonstrations against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle in 1999. This protest marked the birth of the ACGM, which gathered within its folds other activist movements, organizations and networks. For the first time in living memory, possibly ever, many different grievances and causes were represented under one broad banner: social justice. Thus workers walked arm in arm with environmentalists, feminists, human rights workers, farmers, and fair trade advocates. The “ Battle of Seattle” marked the beginning of a new form of activism: the new communication technology that made the globalization of capital possible also spurred the globalization of protest and facilitated “ globalization from below”. The Internet was instrumental in both shrinking vast geographical distances, and in disseminating a new sort of global consciousness.

There was also the increased use of SMSs by the protestors in organizing and carrying out their protests. There were termed as “ Smart Mobs”, though it is still not a major tool of social movement it has had its impact during the 1999 Battle of Seattle, 1992 Critical Mass Bicycle demos of San Francisco and September 2000 protest in Britain over fuel price rise. Many social <https://assignbuster.com/impact-of-media-on-global-social-movements-politics-essay/>

movements relating to environment, health, etc. have taken post Seattle through use of ICTs, social networking, websites, etc. The ‘Coffee Party’ on Facebook is one such example of a movement that was initiated and primarily carried out on the social networking site Facebook. Though these developments seem to hold both a bright future for social movements and interesting times for social movement researchers, “nothing assures us that movements always make society more democratic”[27]. Tilly advocates that, “technological determinism ought to be avoided and that one should recognize that not all new features of social movements result from technical innovations but most of them from alterations in their social and political contexts”[28]. Relying on ICT services also requires being able to cope with their risks and dangers therefore most “21st century social movement activity continues to rely on the local, regional, and national forms of organization that already prevailed during the later 20th century”[29].

HOSTILE MEDIA

“One of the first detailed examinations of a social movement protest in the media focused on a mass demonstration held against the Vietnam War in Britain”[30]. The demonstration involved approximately 60,000 protesters, most of who marched peacefully through the streets of London (with an insignificant number of protestors involved in violent actions). However, “despite the overwhelmingly peaceful nature of the march, the media concentrated most of its coverage on the issue of violence”[31]. There were differences between media outlets in their coverage; they were all united by the overall focus on ‘the same limited aspect – the issue of violence.’ The misrepresentation of this massive political rally, and the totality of the

negative coverage across all media outlets led the investigators to conclude that such reporting poses extreme problems for democracy, which may only be remedied by ' some form of institutional rearrangement'[32].

For any social movement to draw beneficial attention to its activities in the mass media, the first barrier it must overcome is the structural constraints of the medium itself. According to Herman and Chomsky's[33]Propaganda Model, " there are five filters through which all news must pass, that actively shape the media's content. These are (1) the size, ownership and profit orientation of the media, (2) advertising, (3) sourcing, (4) flak (criticism) and (5) anti-communist ideology, which can be interpreted as keeping the discourse within the boundaries of elite interests". According to Sidney Tarrow, " The media are crucial in a social movement's efforts to broadcast its demands. But the media are anything but neutral in the framing of activists' concerns and events. On the one hand, the media provide a broad base for consensus formation that is difficult for movements to achieve on their own. On the other hand, while the media may not work directly for the ruling class, they certainly do not work for social movements"[34].

CONCLUSION

The mass media is an important outlet for social movements, where the quality and nature of media coverage strongly influences how they are perceived in the public eye. It is important for social movements, whose transitional and adversarial nature weakens their ability to secure public legitimacy. Their outsider status, along with their usual resource-poor nature, means that traditional avenues of publicity are not easily accessible and forces them to rely on alternative methods to obtain media access.

<https://assignbuster.com/impact-of-media-on-global-social-movements-politics-essay/>

Traditionally, this involves some form of public spectacle - like a protest - to attract media attention. " These activities have become accepted as mechanisms by which social problems are communicated in the public sphere, alongside public opinion polls and elections and they act as vital means by which citizens can signal their discontent"[35].

Key to any social movement's eventual success in reforming the current world order is its ability to garner majority support, which is severely restricted by the mass media. Global justice movements profess to want to mobilise entire communities worldwide to enable truly participative decision-making. However, if this is really the case, they need to consider whether the same media system that serves to naturalise and legitimise elite decision-making, can really encourage its antithesis, collective grassroots decision-making. It seems an anathema to even consider that by working on the terms set by the mass media, social movements are actually legitimising and tightening its hegemonic power over society, even while it simultaneously acts to de-legitimise or ignore the global justice movement. Therefore, it is time for social movements to take collective action. To start with, " democratic media reform needs to be recast as an end in itself, a public good, not simply a means by which each movement can get its message out"[36]. In this way, a media reform project can be linked to the wider array of social movements calling for a more equitable and participatory democracy.