

Resource mobilisation theory



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The study of social movements is a very broad and encompassing task; with each new movement come new theories, approaches and events that change the field. Social movements, as defined by sociology, can be characterized as a group of persons, who, by sharing a common ideology, band together to try and achieve certain political, economic or social goals. [1] There are a few standard theories to describe, understand and evaluate the effectiveness of social movements. Among the major theories currently looked at today are resource mobilization, collective behaviour theory, frame alignment theory and political opportunities theory. Although each has its own merits and shortcomings, this essay will only be examining the strengths and weaknesses of one particular theory, that of resource mobilization. The strengths focus on the theory's ability to effectively dissect the interactions between various material and non-material resources, the political structure and mobilization, while the weaknesses will examine the theory's reliance on economic models, its lack of historical perspective and its ignorance to 'real-world' factors. The conclusion of the paper will also discuss the future use of the theory, its changing adaptations and whether or not the theory itself is still viable in today's world.

B: History and Assumptions of the Theory

The history of resource mobilization theory begins pre-dominantly with research done in the 1970s. Unlike other theories of social movements at the time, resource mobilization theory, "...replaced the crowd with the organization, and dismissed the psychological variables of alienation and frustration in favour of the rational actor employing instrumental and strategic reasoning." [2] It was this difference, which made it stand out

amongst academics and prompted a flurry of research to compile an overarching framework regarding resource mobilization. However, within this framework of the theory lie two distinct approaches: First, the economic or 'organizational/entrepreneurial' model presented by McCarthy and Zald and secondly, the sociopolitical or 'political/interactive' argued more favorably by authors such as Tilly, Diani, and McAdam. Tilly, Diani and McAdam's emphasis focuses predominately on employing a political model in order to examine the various processes that are claimed to give rise to social movements.[3] They base their ideas on the structure of grievances, in so far as they look to determine what opportunities, links or networks exist within the aggrieved group, in order to give rise to enough mobilization as to claim a social movement. Factors they included range from various forms of political power, to the oft conflicting interests of the state and the aggrieved group and finally to the political resources the group has or may need[4].

Conversely, the 'organization/entrepreneurial' model emphasizes resource management, the role of leaders and leadership, and the dynamics of organization. This approach is much more economics based and therefore tries to apply various economic theories to the study of social movements. Charles Perrow, when describing this approach, makes light of the fact that it is much more 'capitalist' based and therefore the 'organization/entrepreneurial' branch makes reference to such ideas as: product differentiation, social industry, resource competition, social movement entrepreneurs etc.[5]

The theory also sets aside three main assumptions when discussing social movements. 1) That economic prosperity and affluence will generally lead to

a greater number of social movements.[6]2) That people who participate in social movements are inherently rational.[7]3) That the social movements participants must achieve a certain level of political and economic resources for their movement to be a success.[8]Therefore, as nations become more prosperous and generate necessary social movement resources such as education, wealth and communication, these in turn will help spur social movement activity. It therefore follows that this increase in activity will allow rational people to accumulate the resources needed for their social movement to be successful. Kendall defines the theory as such, “ resource mobilization theory focuses on the ability of members of a social movement to acquire resources and mobilize people in order to advance their cause.”[9]Note that the aforementioned affluence is said to be most beneficial when coupled with an ‘ open’ state, which allows groups to mobilize freely and encourages debate and dissent as it promotes the values of freedom, capitalism and transparency. Also, the growth of the welfare state is often seen as a boost to social movements as the State itself can provide resources to struggling movements in the form of aid, workers or development programs.[10]

The resources that the theory describes range from material to non-material, but are said to include, “ money, people’s time and skills, access to the media, and material goods such as property and equipment.”[11]Simply put, resource mobilization theory describes how effective social movements can be, by examining how the groups involved in social movements both mobilize their supporters and manage their resources. Some theorists, such as Anthony Oberschall have furthered the view that the resources defined by

the theory are in a constant state of struggle, in which they are perpetually created, consumed, transferred and/or lost.[12] Oberschall therefore views social movements much like organizations who vie for a limited number of resources in the political marketplace.[13]

A key feature to remember, is that the resources(or assets) outlined in the theory can be of both material and non-material nature. Material assets include currency, buildings, people, telephones and computers. Non-material assets include ideology, will-power, political support, leadership and solidarity.[14]

The other main aspect of the theory is the mobilization aspect. Mobilization is said to occur when a particular group(in this case one assumes a social movement) assembles the aforementioned resources with the explicit purpose on using them to achieve a common goal, change or message through collective action. A distinction must be drawn between the two, as merely gathering resources is not ' mobilization'. Only when those resources have been collectively assigned to pursue a purpose, is mobilization said to take place.[15]

B. Strengths of the Theory

B1. Explanatory power of the Theory:

Foweraker discusses the explanatory staying power of the theory, including its ability to adapt over time.[16]He states that despite it coming under criticism over the past decade or so, " The theory has expanded its explanatory power by including a range of ancillary arguments." The first one of these arguments is that social networking has proven to be a decisive

tool in aiding the mobilization of social movements.[17]Authors John Hansen and Steven Rosentone, in the book *Mobilization, Participation and Democracy in America* discuss the impact of social networks on social mobilization by stating, “ Social networks multiply the effect of mobilization.”[18]This can be seen in everyday life, as mass communication(often one of the most important resources mentioned when discussing resource mobilization theory) has taken off in a way that not even States can control. The freedom of the internet makes mobilization not only easy, but participation costs shrink. It therefore comes to no surprise that as social networks have grown, so too have the ability of organizers to mobilize transnational social movements such as the global environmental movement, the tea-party movement of the trans-national European movement.

Another aspect of this particular strength of resource mobilization theory lies in its explanatory power to explain the various dynamics of mobilization; to help identify the various resources that social movements need in order to mobilize, the distinctive organizational features needed with condition social movements and the ever growing relationships between the political system as a whole and these movements.[19]By moving slightly away from the purely social/cultural or political and instead focusing more generally on resource management and strategy, resource mobilization theory highlights the growing importance of strategic/instrumental action. It also shows a level of understanding in which the decisions taken by the various actors actively affect the outcome of the ‘ conflict’ between the movement and the system. [20]

B2. Strong analysis of the political system and its interactions with collective action:

Resource mobilization theory also includes a very important emphasis on the political process. This is a key feature which provides useful insights into the how social movements interact within the political system. Moreover, an examination of the structure of the political system tends to yield interesting results regarding the set of political factors which either facilitate or harm the emergence of social movements.[21]The theory further goes on to focus on the interactions between collective action, social networks and group identity. Foweraker identifies these as prior social organizational interaction and says, “ Levels of prior social organization influence the degree and type of social mobilization.”[22]

C. Weaknesses of the Theory

C1. Adherence to economic cost/benefit models:

The first of several weaknesses of resource mobilization theory centre on its apparent adherence to an ‘ economic rationality’, which presupposes various costs and benefits of a common ‘ rational’ participants. Foweraker believes this shortcoming gives rise to two fundamental flaws of resource mobilization theory and described these two problems as such,

“ First, social actors are presumed to employ a narrowly instrumental rationality which bridges a rigid means/end distinction. The careful weighing of costs and benefits implied by the means/end model falls far short of a universal or complete account of collective action, if only because action ‘ may be its own reward’. More particularly, to recall Weber’s analysis of social action, the motives that predispose the actor to act may be not merely

instrumental, but habitual, affective and, above all, expressive.”[23]If the theory only cares about the rationality of actors, then it fails to account for what ‘rationality’ actually is, as the definition of such ranges from individual to individual. If one person enjoys protesting for the sake of protesting and not, as the theory would say, to achieve a goal, then how can the theory describe their rationality as a participant in a social movement?

C2. Rationality without reference to social context and lack of cultural considerations:

The second weakness of the theory revolves around an idea of ‘solitary rationality’. Resource mobilization theory assumes that rationality is at all times beneficial, yet with any social or historical context, it is nearly impossible to determine how the various costs and benefits of the movements are calculated. Foweraker describes this as a ‘tautological trap’, in which the theory, “must then define the actor’s interests in such a way that no matter what choice is made it is always sent to further those interests.”[24]Melucci agrees with this ascertain by stating that, “collective action is never based solely on cost-benefit calculation and a collective identity is never entirely negotiable.”[25]As Scott correctly points out, social movements must include, “the cultural as well as the purposive aspects”[26]for as it stands now, resource mobilization theory understands the ‘how’ of social movements, but not the ‘why.’[27]Also, an associated weakness of the theory is that it gives little room for any sort of cultural considerations. Scott addresses this notion, by underpinning that without any reasonable consideration of cultural, solitary action seems very unlikely.[28]

C3. Ignorance of ‘ real-world’ variables and factors:

The third overarching criticism of resource mobilization theory stems of its apparent lack of real world considerations. The theory purports to understand the dynamic relationship between social movements, yet pays no heed to events such as political negotiations, bribery, espionage and sabotage. Foweraker outlines political negotiations as being more commonplace than any other political tool and states, “ Since [rational] choice is often a result of interactions with a living political environment, it makes little sense to think of it as uncontaminated by negotiations...”[29]Another interesting point made by Scott Lash and John Urry in their paper, *The New Marxism of Collective Action: A Critical Analysis* argue that, “ the rationality applying to one-off game-like situations does not necessarily apply to long-term relations.”[30]This also applies to the theory of ‘ free-riding’ in which people may participate in a movement purely because of the advantageous position it will put them in, and not because they truly feel motivated in the movement itself. Therefore resources may be drained and fail if enough free riders are brought on. In particular, the theory fails to explain social movements that are too weak to distribute selective benefits...”[31]due exactly to this problem.

D. Conclusion and Future:

After having discussed the various strengths and weaknesses of resource mobilization theory, this paper will now conclude with a look into the future; regarding both longevity of the theory and the overall attractiveness to academics in its current form. Given the overarching criticisms inherent to the theory itself, it should come as no surprise that the theory has a lot of

ground to other theories of social movements, such as Political Opportunities theory, Frame Alignment theory or any of a new number of New Social Movement theories.[32]However, there is still plenty of underlying merit of resource mobilization theory, which this paper believes will keep it in the foreground of social movement theory for the foreseeable future. This is mainly due to the essential fact that without resources, regardless of how one defines them, social movements simply cannot generate enough momentum to sustain themselves. Therefore, taking a look into the various approaches of mobilization with regards to these resources is as important now, than it was in the 1970s. Coupled with its relative openness and adaptability should make resource mobilization theory a useful tool for the foreseeable future.