

# Why is it difficult to define a new social movement?

[Society](#)



When one thinks of "new social movements" (NSM's) it is fair to say that a number of images may spring into peoples' minds. To some, Swampy chaining himself to a tree will automatically be imagined, for others, they may think of the anti-globalisation protests in Seattle or on the streets of London. The fact is that both of these ideas come under this broad title and it is for that reason that it can be difficult to define exactly what is meant by an NSM. This essay will attempt to address why NSM's have come into existence, which sections of society choose to become involved and how these groups operate.

Having done this, the essay will then attempt to show why defining an NSM is problematic. It is fair to say that most people who choose to participate in NSM's do so because they feel that conventional politics does not or has not dealt with the issues that they feel are important. It is, therefore, the aim of the NSM's to highlight these issues and bring them to the attention of either the politicians or the general public in the hope that government policy will adopt a different strategy.

It has been said that "one repeated motif in the discussion of new social movements is the view that they are, in contrast to older movements, primarily social or cultural in nature and only secondary, if at all, political." (Scott, 1990: 16). What Alan Scott is saying here is that the main ideas behind social movements are the attempts to change the way society exist as a whole and not necessarily the way people view their politics. Being part of a social movement is not just a way of thinking; it is a belief in a certain ideal that transcends all aspects of your life.

In this way, it can be said that NSM's are expressive in their views as opposed to political parties, who are instrumental. An NSM is not necessarily motivated by achieving a pre-set goal but by the belief itself. This is one reason that can explain why members or 'adherents' of social movements are fully prepared to make self-sacrifices, such as imprisonment, for their cause. One important ramification of this is that the adherents to social movements are prepared to step outside the law to achieve their goals.

This creates a very serious dilemma for governments because if people are prepared to act illegally then the threat of legal action will not act as a deterrent. In other words, if people have a strong enough will then in the end, there is nothing to stop them. As Russell Dalton and Manfred Kuechler wrote " the new social movement approach claims that many NSM's intentionally remain outside the institutionalized framework of government. " (Dalton et al. , 1990: 14). The NSM's prefer to remain in this position to avoid being forced to compromise their goals.

What this suggests is that NSM's actively promote criminal behaviour and rationalize it by saying that it is for a good cause. However, in a survey conducted by Alan Marsh in 1977, it was found that 55 per cent of the people questioned believed that " it is justified to break the law to protest about something you feel may be very unjust or harmful. " (Byrne, 1997: 4).

Although these activities are illegal, the majority of people are prepared to act as such anyway.

This illustrates the complications that arise when one tries to define NSM's. On the one hand, you could say that they choose to be troublemakers,

committing crimes and illegal protests, but on the other hand, you see that in fact a substantial proportion of the population shares their views on the appropriate course of action. A major difficulty with trying to define NSM's is to distinguish with what exactly we are dealing. What is meant by this is what sort or group of people or section of society do we class as a new social movement?

For example, we would class feminists and green activists as social movements but this also leads to difficulty in defining what an NSM actually is. In terms of ideology, feminists and green activists have little in common yet they would both fall into the category of NSM's. A very extreme example of this is the Al' Queida terrorist network and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). These two groups could not be more different if they tried but to a certain extent they can both be classed as social movements.

On the one hand, you have the CND, an organisation at the heart of the Peace Movement, whose " supporters have employed tactics which extend from serious academic work on the probable effects of nuclear warfare, to mass demonstrations, and to a wide variety of non-violent direct action. " (Byrne, 1997: 11). On the other hand, you have the Al' Queida terrorist network, the alliance responsible for the September 11th attack upon New York's World Trade Centre and the Pentagon.

This group is responsible for the deaths of thousands of innocent people - the CND, however, call for an end to weapons of mass destruction. How then can you class the Al' Queida terrorist network as a social movement? Its members are willing to step outside the conventional channels to achieve

their goals. They are prepared to fight and die for their cause as long as by their death they have advanced towards their end goal - the destruction of the US.

The Al' Queida is one extreme example of how an NSM can be described as irrational and unreasonable. Their adherents are not motivated by self-interest but by their unbreakable belief in the cause. They also seem to think that they are justified in breaking the law or ignoring any kind of conventional methods. Here we can see how defining a NSM can be made difficult. The spectrum when it comes to social movements is so diversified that it leads to problems in terms of what can and cannot be included.

It is difficult to comprehend that two such different groups can be classified under the same heading. The Al' Queida terrorist network is, to a certain extent, an example of how NSM's choose to exist in terms of their structure. The Al' Queida exists with more recognizable members, such as Osama Bin Laden, but the fact remains that if he were to be captured or killed then that would have little effect on the remainder of the group. The adherents will still believe in their cause and they will still do all they can to realize their vision.

Of course, this is a very extreme example of a NSM and when we look at more mainstream groups the structure is less militant but the basic ideas remain the same. On a whole, NSM's attempt to avoid the hierarchical approach of the conventional political parties and instead choose to opt for a more co-operative system. The CND is actually an example of how a structured organisation can exist within the informally organized Peace

Movement. It is difficult to describe the structure of an NSM as even the word 'structure' suggests some kind of organisation.

Referring to NSM's as groups also causes problems as this suggests that there would be some kind of hierarchy when in fact, as Brand et al. suggest " New social movement theorists maintain that these groups prefer a decentralized, open, and democratic structure that is more in tune with the participatory tendencies of their supporters. " (Dalton et al. , 1990: 13). It is clear that NSM's choose to steer away from creating any formal structure as to avoid becoming the political parties that they are attempting to influence. The structure of NSM's has strong links with their ideology.

NSM's are inclined to believe more in a co-operative society where every person has his or her own personal space in which they have the right to exist and the right to choose how they wish to live their lives. This means that NSM's have no leaders as such due to the adherents wish to maintain a sense of autonomy. To many adherents of social movements it is important for them as individuals to maintain their rights to exist as they see fitting. The idea of autonomy is of great importance when trying to discuss NSM's and the fact that they demand various aspects of this autonomy adds weight to the arguments for difficulty with definition.

The first aspect is personal autonomy. The idea that adherents have the social 'space' to grow as individuals and develop their own views and ideas, as opposed to being limited by constraints placed upon them by society. An example of this sort of autonomy can be found when we look at the Women's movement of the early seventies. Here women were not only fighting for

their sex as a whole but for their own personal right to equality within the male dominated system. The Women's movement is also a good example of the second aspect of autonomy: that of group autonomy.

Here we can consider the issue of abortion and the rights of women. This issue can be evaluated on both levels: personal and as a group. On a personal level, the efforts of the movement mean that the choice is there and whichever path is chosen is not dictated by anyone other than the parties involved. The women's movement fought for the rights of all women to choose whether or not to have abortions so that no matter what background you come from or what religion you are, every woman has the right to choose.

The third aspect of autonomy is described as the 'autonomy of struggle', which is to say "the insistence that the movement and those it represents be allowed to fight their own corner without interference from other movements, and without subordinating their demands to other external priorities." (Scott, 1990: 20). We now see that this issue of autonomy is very important to NSM's. A social movement sees itself through its own rights and the rights of its adherents to live their lives in a certain fashion.

This leads on to the idea of a social movement helping people to define themselves in terms of their place in society. This is prime example of how adherents differ to members of conventional political parties. A Conservative does not really have to make any concessions upon his or her lifestyle in order to be a member of the Conservative party but being an environmentalist is about a change in how one acts in general. What this

illustrates is the argument that NSM's do not necessarily take action towards political reform but in fact towards social reform.

One of the main elements that makes defining NSM's so difficult is who makes up the adherents of these movements. Over the last thirty years, there has been an increase in the so-called new politics but can this all being attributed to the uprising of the student movement or are the adherents far more diversified? As has already been mentioned, different people have different views on what they consider to be an NSM. Are we supposed to believe that all adherents are in fact longhaired, unwashed students who have nothing better to do with their time that form squatter camps and disrupt building work?

The classical approach to NSM's suggests that most adherents turn to social movements due to relative deprivation. The idea that they are somehow incapable of participating in conventional politics so they choose NSM's as an alternative. However, when classicalists looked at the type of people involved in the civil rights movement in the US during the fifties and sixties, they found that it was not only the alienated black population that was involved but also the white middle class. The theory of 'resource mobilization' was put forward as an alternative to the classical theory.

Here, the authors of the theory believed that participation in NSM's was to do with resources. What 'resources' mean is the availability of finances, office space and other intangible assets such as time and education. It suggests that there has been an evolution of the middle class to include people such as teachers and lecturers who have created a class not through economic



wealth but through their knowledge and intelligence. The typical adherent to NSM's is far from the image of a tree-hugging extremist but is, in fact, a member of this new middle class, a technocrat.

What are the reasons behind this? That is a hard question to answer but Ronald Inglehart suggested the theory of 'post-materialism'. " Inglehart argues that the post-war generation have been socialized into such higher order or 'post-material' values, and its this which motivates their support for social movements. " (Byrne, 1997: 55). Here, the argument is that the people who choose to become involved in NSM's are those who feel that they have achieved all the material possessions that they can and are therefore, looking for some other kind of personal fulfillment.

This theory holds a number of flaws, for example, how can Inglehart be sure that people would choose to become involved in social movements instead of charity work in their quest for personal fulfillment? Another problem arises when you try to quantify the level of material wealth that constitutes satisfaction and at which point the person decides to give up the search for more money. However, the fact remains that it has become more apparent over the years that it is this new middle class that is the typical adherents to the NSM's but it has not become clear why it is this group.

The fact is that these new social movements choose to exist outside the conventional channels of politics. They do not have the same structure as the mainstream political parties as they are not supposed to be as such. They are an ideology that is followed through choice and lead to more extreme measures than usual politics to the extent that adherents make a

lifestyle decision. The difficulty in defining NSM's comes from all aspects of their existence.

The title of a social movement covers such a diverse range of beliefs and ideas that any kind of set rules will ultimately fail as no statement can be truly all-inclusive. Neither would NSM's want to be able to be defined as it goes against all the ideals for which they stand - the ideals of a hierarchy free alliance where the emphasis is on co-operation and not leadership. This statement itself causes problems, as it is a sweeping generalization of the group of social movements as a whole. The difficulties of defining new social movements appear because of the fact that no two movements or beliefs are exactly the same.