

Before focusing on the question why and how people form social movements, the term itself deserves clarification. Social Movements are group actions. They are informal groupings of various sizes of individuals and/or organizations, focused on specific social and/or political issues, often dominated by charismatic leadership. As the term "movement" indicates, the movement, whatever its purpose, aims at a change of the status quo.

The 19th century was the hour of birth of modern social movements, which have become possible through the means of the modernist project and the corresponding widespread education of an increasingly urbanized population. Social movements arose as a feature of Western, liberal culture and the era of enlightenment. Historically, movements predominately aimed at national materialistic goals, but nowadays include broad non-materialistic, global goals, ranging from gay rights- to anti-nuclear movements.

By concentrating masses of people to relatively confined areas, the 19th century saw an increase in social interaction. As many cities grew at the centres of the industrial revolution, the gathering of large masses of workers was responsible for the rise of many early social movements, which addressed the matter of social class. The same mechanisms still hold truth today; a movement needs a number of likely minded individuals capable of communicating with each other in order to advocate their movement. The evolution of communication technologies and the rise of virtual environments – sometimes referred to as the "third space" – have lessened the requirement of physical proximity. Traditional borders have lost their importance, as social movements have globalized themselves.

The "how" of movements saw a dramatic addition by the post-1968 "new left", focusing on radical- instead of traditional reform-movements. For the "new left", or "new social movements", the state, or other well-established institutions, are no longer of primary concern. Instead, a new global civil society is on the upswing, changing the world from the bottom-up. New global civil society clusters are springing up – an overarching ideology transcending the nation-state and proclaiming autonomy from existing frameworks as an end in itself. Or not, as critics of the "movement of movements" claim, who advocate that the only motivation surrounding all the fuzzy talk about a new global civil society is the fact that each individual movement failed to capture a significant domestic audience and is thus better off claiming to be a part of a hard-to-grasp global movement than merely nationally insignificant.

The "how" has changed. Whereas early social movements often tried to gain legitimacy through the political process (the UK's Labour Party or German SPD as examples), the "new left" no longer derives its legitimacy from public support, but the recognition of the movement's social isolation. By rejecting any collective political subject and instead favouring maximum autonomization and legitimation by mere existence, a reconciliation of autonomy and mass politics becomes impossible. Different "how"s can also be illustrated by the pre-modernists' rampage in Seattle, outlined in the following paragraph, in contrast with peaceful movements such as Mahatma Gandhi's civil disobedience movement. Recapitulating, there appear to be as many "how"s as "why"s.

It is hard to pinpoint "why" people form social movements, besides the obvious statement that social dissatisfaction can ignite the wish for a change from the status quo, thus a movement. Different eras of modern history deliver different motives for social movements, but a typical, contemporary, "why"-example is globalization, despite the fact that it appears incomprehensible to grasp. Various social movements turned the 1999 Seattle WTO meetings into everything the planners had not anticipated. Green and prosperous Seattle, the home of Microsoft, Starbucks and Amazon.com, was faced with the full starting line-up of social movements: the pre-modern, modern and post-modern face of anti-globalization. The pre-modernists, the "new left", advocated a full break with the current system as the only sensible solution. This was illustrated by their attempts to destroy as much of the "rotten and corrupt" system as possible, which led to unexpected street violence. The modern faces of anti-globalization were those of fearful union-workers, scared of comparative advantages across international borders. The post-modern protesters were united in what they opposed, but they arrived without an alternative. Instead, they aimed at establishing a counter-hegemonic rhetoric undermining the legitimacy of the established interests – notably without calling for a break from the whole system (Veseth).

The aims of "new left" movements appear questionable. Whereas "traditional" social movements, such as the Animal Rights movement, Mahatma Gandhi's quest for Indian independence or the unions' protests in Seattle, clearly aimed (and still aim) at the reform of existing systems, the "new left" refuses to play by the rules laid down by state-based territorial politics. The rules of the old "how" have been abandoned. Autonomy is the new name of the game, as the "new left" does not seem to advocate any kind of global state. Political refusal is worthier than political participation and anti-politics the ethos of their proclaimed civil society. Evidence seems to indicate that the work of movements and global civil society cannot provide adequate governance without government, which explains a correlation between social movements successes and existing governing capacities (Etzioni), but governance without government seems to be the overarching mantra of the "new left". By resisting institutionalization and being satisfied with pure visibility, autonomous dignity and a large degree of insignificance, the "how" of the "new left" becomes highly questionable. Not in regard of its satisfactory value for its proponents, but in regard of its significance.

In conclusions, the "why"s of social movements are innumerable, as the example of anti-globalization, as an umbrella-term for a magnitude of movements, illustrated. Regarding the "how"s of social movements, broad categories distinguish reform- and radical movements, methods of work, target audiences and general aims (materialistic gains, e.g. class-interests vs. non-materialistic gains, e.g. the environment), but there appear to be nearly as many "how"s as "why"s. What unites all social movements are general characteristics. Social movements are group actions, often depend upon charismatic leadership, are prevalent, but not exclusively, in western, liberal societies and can be classified as counter-hegemonic, as movements try to alter the status quo. If you were already there, there would be no reason to move.