SOCIAL MOVEMENTS 101:
QUESTIONS AND SOME ANSWERS ABOUT PEOPLES' STRUGGLES

1. What Do We Understand by *Social Movements*?

Between the 1840s and the 1940s, the heyday of industrial capitalism in the U.S. and Europe, the Left was anchored in working-class struggle, trade unions, and political parties. Taking account of the fact that in no case did the Left make a socialist revolution in Europe or the U.S., some scholars have called these Left-labor mobilizations "citizenship movements" because they "were organized by and on behalf of categories of people excluded in some ways from full human rights, political participation, or basic economic protections" (Jasper, 7). In the United States, as in the rest of the world, anarchists, socialists, and communists played a key role in citizenship movements, and in practice most shared the goal of expanding democracy rather than overthrowing capitalism; though they spoke of revolution, in most cases they fought for radical reform.

These movements were part of the expansion of industrial capitalist societies, labor markets, and democratic polities, and rather than leading to the overthrow of capitalism, they led to its consolidation following World War II, when parliamentary democracy was first stabilized in Europe. In the U.S., organized labor was fully incorporated into the Democratic Party in the 1930s and 40s, and after the purges of the CIO in the 1950s, supported Cold War anti-communism and its corollary, counterinsurgency against revolutionary movements in the "Third World" in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The containment of organized labor within the formal political arena went together with the effort to turn industrial workers into mass consumers on the model of American "Fordism." For capital as well as organized labor in Europe, Japan, and the U.S., this was a more stable set of political arrangements than previous ones, ushering in what some historians have called the "Golden Age" of capitalism from 1945-75.

Taken together, Roosevelt's New Deal, Taft-Hartley labor legislation, and McCarthy's Red Scare—a mix of reform and repression—established the parameters of the new order, bringing organized labor into the Cold War consensus, and purging detractors in the 1950s. Organized labor was no longer outside of formal political life and representation; it had become a player in national politics, but traded in its independence in the process. It was a pillar of the new global order dominated by the U.S.—the lone capitalist power not only to have survived, but to have thrived during World War II. In effect, the Cold War resulted because U.S. government officials, as well as the captains of industry and finance with whom they were interchangeable, recognized that the economy would have to be maintained through preparation for ever-more technologically sophisticated forms of warfare. Once the anti-communist purges of the labor movement were carried out, there was no opposition from union leadership.

Economically, the new order was increasingly characterized less by industry than by the growth of services, finance, real state, and stock market speculation, and this shift was accompanied by a "proliferation of new collective actors, new grievances, and new

modes of political action" (Lopez, 215). The new set of arrangements had ratified labor's centrality, but class struggle, not to mention working-class internationalism, lost ground as the primary strategic vision for political transformation. Business unionism, in which representatives of labor cut the best deals they could with politicians and captains of industry, dominated the U.S. in the 1950s and 60s. In contrast to Western Europe, the U.K., Canada, and Australia, whose parliamentary democracies featured powerful trade union movements and labor and/or Communist parties, in the U.S., through a program of affirmative action for white ethnic workers of European descent, the "American dream" of middle-class consumption and leisure became possible, through private mortgage lending as well as federal, state, and regional public policies. This subsidized homeownership, suburbanization, and higher education as paths to social mobility.

Other categories than class, such as race/ethnicity and gender, thus acquired more relevance as motors of mass mobilization and disruption of the existing political system, since it was clear to radicals that the trade union movement had become an obstacle to progressive social change, rather than its instrument. The multiple, flexible, and fragmented mass movements in this era of economic expansion were labeled "social movements," and were associated with the rise of the New Left in the 1960s. They were defined in two, intertwined senses: first, as historical developments particular to "post-industrial" societies in the U.S. and Western Europe (which were rapidly de-industrializing under the impact of new communications, aero-space technologies, and cheap imports of consumer goods); and second, as contentious, disruptive, informal, and non-institutional, rather than bureaucratic and institutional, like the trade unions and political parties of the Old Left in the 1930s and 40s. The radical revival began in the mid-1950s with the African American demand for civil rights. In Africa and Asia nationalist movements challenged European colonialism, proving that white power and dominance was vulnerable across the world, and African Americans took note. However, the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, which ruled that segregated schools were inherently unequal and unjust, opened space for a mass movement (Gosse, 6).

Thus in the U.S., the New Left is the term applied to the broad combination of all these "social movements," from Civil Rights and Black Power, student and anti-war, to feminist, gay rights, and ethnic minority rights (American Indian Movement, Chicano, Asian American, Puerto Rican) in the 1960s and 70s. They were linked by the importance they placed in the dignity of the individual and the right of every American to full citizenship. Until 1968, these diverse movements shared two basic assumptions: that by "speaking truth to power" (confronting oppression nonviolently), they could radically change society; and that "the whole world was watching" (moral witness and media coverage as tools). Perhaps more importantly, they understood that mass direct action outside of and in opposition to the Democratic Party was the precondition for the rebirth of radical democracy in the U.S.

In short**, *a social movement is the mass mobilization and self-organization of powerless people in order to gain or secure their rights; it is composed of defiant local mobilizations connected to other local movements with similar aims by formal and***

informal networks of information and support. It surmounts the expectations, plans, and instructions of formal leadership and existing organizations by acting spontaneously, taking risks, and behaving unpredictably. Though there is considerable scholarly controversy over most aspects of social movements, on this point—one of terminology—there is none.

2. Is Any Peoples' Organization a Movement?

During the past three decades, activists, organizers, and scholars have engaged in heated debates about how post-WWII social movements in the U.S. are to be characterized and understood. Despite multiple areas of controversy, one point of agreement stands out: a social movement arises when *oppressed and/or exploited people* without political and economic leverage experience indignation over their conditions of life, and mobilize *massively* to promote or resist changes in the structure of society. This involves recourse to non-institutional forms of political participation rooted in direct action (McAdam, 25). Although social movements can only be effective through "conscious, concerted, and relatively sustained efforts by organized groups" (Jasper, 5), movements are not synonymous with their organizations. Rather, they are identified with mobilized masses and contentious politics, which are participatory and consensus-oriented within (Polleta, 6), as well as disruptive and confrontational without (Lopez, 10).

Like the civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement was spurred by federal legislation: the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title VII, prohibited discrimination in employment on the basis of race. In an apparent effort to ensure the bill's defeat, Virginia representative Howard W. Smith proposed an amendment that would prohibit discrimination in employment on the basis of gender. Smith's maneuver caused havoc. The bill was approved and the new law provided that employment discrimination complaints could be sent to the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission, which was soon besieged with women's grievances about gender discrimination. The overworked Commission followed up on class action complaints only, ignored individual complaints, and, in general, paid little attention to women's grievances, which were considered less important than racial issues.

This unequal treatment soon spurred the response of a core of women's organizations that did not receive support from existing women's groups such as the League of Women Voters (LWV), the American Association of University Women (AAUW), and the Citizens' Advisory Council on the Status of Women. This new feminist nucleus (the "second wave") felt compelled to create its own organization, and in 1966, 28 women formed the National Organization for Women (NOW) "to take action to bring American women into full participation in the mainstream of American society *now*" (Woloch, 516). NOW was a formal organization with elected officers, dues-paying members, and state branches. However, one year later, in 1967, NOW was challenged by the emergence of a younger, more radical generation of activist women confronting the contradictions they faced within the anti-Vietnam War movement (SDS) and the civil rights movement (SNCC). Even though they ran freedom schools and libraries, registered voters, lived

with risk and fear, and shared egalitarian goals, they were customarily excluded from decision-making roles and expected to assume traditional female tasks as typists, clerical workers, and sexual companions of male activists. Resentment over gender inequality began simmering. As Roxane Dunbar-Ortiz, a historian, activist, and organizer of many causes, including women's liberation, explains in her memoir: "The only universal truth I could detect was the absence of women's voices" (Dunbar-Ortiz, 97).

Women's liberation groups multiplied spontaneously, permeating cities, campuses, and even suburbs to conform a mass of women fighting against sexism through direct-action and "consciousness-raising." "It's not a movement, it's a State of Mind" wrote journalist Sally Kempton in the *New York Times* in 1970 to convey the rapid growth of feminist groups all over the country. The appeal of the approach taken by this mass of younger women after 1967 was so great that even NOW, which had considered the younger generation a "lunatic fringe," whose "antics" would only injure the cause, adopted the tactic of "consciousness-raising" and promoted it among its ranks (Woloch, 520). By the early 1970s, two clearly identifiable wings of feminism emerged: the "moderate" wing that called for equity laws and reform and constituted itself around NOW, and the "radical" wing, the movement itself, that called for abolishing gender roles in the name of "revolution," and avoided institutionalization.

The women's liberation movement provides the best example of how an organization is not synonymous with a movement. When NOW was challenged by the mass mobilization of younger women—already experienced in civil rights and anti-war activism—through direct action, feminist causes and demands gained official sanction and legitimacy.

3. Are Social Movements Composed of Broad Coalitions of Peoples' Organizations?

Although such coalitions can strengthen social movement gains by slowing down the process of fragmentation once the high tide of protest and mobilization recedes, as it inevitably does, a social movement is much more than a coalition of organizations. A social movement constitutes and sustains itself through multiple means, formal membership organizations among them.

On February 1, 1960, four middle-class students from the Negro Agricultural and Technical College in Greensboro, North Carolina, entered a store and were refused service at the lunch counter. They started a sit-in campaign of direct action, as pioneered in the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, which rapidly spread throughout the South. Two months later, in April, student delegates from dozens of universities assembled at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, and formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC emerged as an independent organization led by youth from the new black middle-class, and aimed to serve as link between student activism and the civil rights movement.

Through the summer and fall of 1960, militant SNCC activities mushroomed. During these years SNCC acquired a reputation for providing the "shock troops" of the civil

rights movement, and for its confrontational style. SNCC pioneered two strategies that put them in the vanguard of the civil rights struggle: high-risk direct action, and grassroots community organizing in the rural South (Andrews, 46-8). For SNCC, mobilizing and organizing went hand in hand. Organizing involved creating ongoing groups that were mass-based in the sense that the people a group purported to have real impact on the group's direction; mobilizing was more sporadic, and involved large numbers of people for relatively short periods of time, and for relatively dramatic activities (Payne, 897).

However, it was the mass mobilization of black people that forced the federal government to yield and made concessions. This mobilization took place mainly through segregated institutions where people were already organized, such as churches and black colleges. Nevertheless, these organizations did not and could not monitor protest, which was always beyond and ahead of them. Organizations such as SNCC, SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), and the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) worked together during this period, but SNCC and the SCLC were more oriented toward direct action than toward building formal membership, for the simple reason that exemplary direct action inspired mass mobilization, which is what made the movement so powerful. The case of SNCC and other civil rights organizations illustrates the point that a movement is always more than the sum of its organizations.

In conclusion, we can speak of a social movement when *the strength and political power wielded by oppressed people comes from the leverage they gain by creating new organizations or reshaping existing ones in order to sustain their efforts. Whatever influence such groups have had in U.S. politics resulted from the strength of mass movements, and their belligerent, disruptive, and extra-institutional kind of politics, rather than the organizations themselves.* Pre-existing organizations that survive and come to represent the mass movement do so by transforming themselves beyond recognition. This was true of the Bolshevik Party in Russia, which became almost alien to its founders after its remarkable growth in 1917-18, as well as SDS, which grew so rapidly after 1967 that it quickly imploded under the pressure to transform itself.

4. What is the role of social movement organizations in U.S. History?

In the cases of the industrial workers' movement in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, as well as in the cases of unemployed workers, welfare rights, women rights, and civil rights movements of the second half of the twentieth century, movements are more likely to gain more "from mass protest and the disruptive consequences of protest" (Piven and Cloward, 36) than through their organizations. This is because historically, their organizations "were acutely vulnerable to internal oligarchy and stasis and to external integration with elites, the bureaucratic organizations … tended to blunt the militancy that was the fundamental source of such influence as the movements exerted" (Piven and Cloward, xv).

In the case of the industrial workers, their defiance cost them thousands of arrests, injuries, and killings, but they also won higher pay, shorter hours, government social welfare measures, and, more importantly, the right to organize. The right to unionization, of course, was a great victory because through it workers gained a measure of job security, and commanded vast resources for political influence: millions of organized voters and multi-million-dollar treasuries from dues. Still, unionization also "ritualizes and encapsulates strike power, thus limiting its disruptive impact on production, and limiting the political reverberations of economic disruptions as well" (Piven and Cloward, 174). On the other hand, these results yielded little for them in the electoral process. During the spring and summer of 1934 mass strikes spread as they escaped the control of established union leaders and became more unpredictable. "The unorganized disruptions of industrial workers in the 1930s produced some political gains, but the organized electoral activities of the unions could not sustain them" (Piven and Cloward, 174-5). New gains would require a new protest movement, a new outbreak of mass defiance capable of spurning rules and authorities in the workplace, and capable of spurning the rules and authorities in the union system as well. This took place from 1968-73.

In the civil rights movement, specifically SNCC, sit-ins and mass direct action became more and more limited to the organizations themselves over time, especially once local campaigns lost momentum after the Democratic Convention in 1964. Some scholars suggest that the leadership acquired skills and capacities to the point where it swallowed the movement. The problem was that SNCC had the ability to decide "how to conduct their deliberations, how to structure their organizations, how to communicate their message, how to advance their agenda," but not to sustain the mass movement or impact the larger political structure itself (Polleta, 21).

In other words, the case of SNCC shows one of the greatest dilemmas any organization characterized by "minimal division of labor, decentralized authority, and an egalitarian ethos and whose decision making is direct and consensus oriented" (6) has to face in the United States. The predicament is that once they have advanced efforts to secure institutional political change, and although they aim to effect political changes without reproducing the structure they oppose, movement organizations face the pressure to survive and thrive, and therefore ending up reproducing some aspects of the structure they aimed to transform (Polleta, 6-7). Their primary aim is often to reproduce themselves—the classic definition of bureaucracy formulated by Max Weber, a founder of sociology.

Organizers and leaders cannot prevent the ebbing of protest, nor the erosion of whatever influence protest yields. They can, however, be prepared to win whatever can be won, while it can still be won. ***Established organizations and leaderships, in other words, are essential to helping a mass movement make the most of the opportunities that mobilization and protest can generate; to seizing the moment. And the ability to seize the moment often marks the difference between partial victory and abject defeat.***

5. When Are Social Movements Most Likely to Succeed?

Social movements emerge and succeed in moments of large-scale transformation, and when working people have achieved positions in institutional life that give them the possibility to make significant disruptions in established political systems. That is to say, when great changes in the economic structure of society are unleashed by historical developments, they undermine political stability, thereby opening new spaces and possibilities for protest. The growth of industrial manufacturing in large mines, mills, and factories helped create a more centralized mass proletariat at strategic sites of production. With the passing of the torch from the first generation of immigrant workers, defeated in the 1920s, to their offspring in the second generation, conditions were ripe for the growth of industrial unionism in the 1930s. The two generations were 40 million-strong, and the second generation alone numbered 25 million. After 1933, their mass sit-down strikes and pickets—tactics pioneered by the IWW—shut down the world's most powerful capitalist firms in autos, rubber, chemicals, electricity, coal, iron, steel, and transport. This was accomplished outside and against the AFL and the Democratic Party.

The New Left, on the other hand, was the product of three interrelated historical developments: first, the disruption provoked by WWII at every level of society; second, the Cold War, which cut radicals and leftists off from their base in different institutions, shattering the liberal-Left alliance that was the basis for political stability at home during the 1930s and World War II; and third, the postwar economic boom, the suburbanization of the new white working class and middle-class, and the higher educational system built in state and private colleges and universities. However, the radical extension of democracy that the New Left sought to bring about became possible only when masses of people arose to break down the Cold War's limits on freedom of thought, expression, and organization. It took not one but many movements, and over several decades, to cut through the web of legal, cultural, and institutional constraints that made many Americans "second-class citizens" in their own country because of their color, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or political beliefs (Gosse, 38).

Times of change and distress permit people who usually accept the authority of their rulers and the legitimacy of institutional arrangements to believe that they are wrong and unjust. People who ordinarily consider themselves helpless come to believe they have some capacity to change their lives. Most importantly, this happens on a massive scale, among millions and tens of millions. When people are finally roused to protest against great odds, they choose the options available to them within the limits imposed by circumstances. Once protest erupts, the social structure, the political system, social location, and their access to resources largely determine the specific form protest takes. Generally, factory workers strike, while ghetto neighborhoods—where unemployment is high—riot. In the end, the gains of the social movements of the New Left were those that historical circumstances made possible. People make their own history, but not under circumstances of their own choosing, and not just as they please.

In conclusion, activists, organizers, and scholars of all colors and ideological stripes, despite their multiple disagreements, are of one opinion that social movements are more

likely to succeed when there are structural opportunities that movements learn to capitalize on in their own favor. These opportunities do not arise out of mere will to change society, but at specific conjunctures and for particular reasons.

6. What About Revolutionary Movements of Colonized People?

In the U.S., World War II resolved the problem of disarticulation between productive capacity and market demand—between workers and consumers—that was the cause of the Great Depression in the 1930s. The war itself made viable the production of new technologies; computers and nuclear energy, for example. The postwar period introduced the American form of capitalist accumulation that now rules the world, and led to the "historically unprecedented growth, unification and technological power of capitalism itself, with fully globalized circuits of production and circulation, without colonial divisions and with increasing modernization of travel, transport and communication technologies, with far-reaching consequences for the international division of labour, not to speak of the technologies and effectiveness of subsequent imperialist wars—of destruction, and of prolonged encirclement—against emerging socialist states and movements in the backward zones" (Ahmad, 20).

Thus the central contradiction of this historical process is that an unprecedented phase of capitalist expansion took place simultaneously with the de-colonization of a peripheral capitalist world—Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean—fighting for sovereignty and self-determination according to ideals that were largely non-capitalist. In other words, the expansion of capitalism in the liberal metropolitan core—Western Europe, Japan, Canada, Australia—under U.S leadership, was coeval with the ascendance of socialism in the so-called Third World—as well as the margins of Europe (Italy, Spain, Portugal). After World War II, then, the geography of social revolution shifted decisively away from urban Europe and North America to the largely rural Third World and the most marginal regions of Europe itself.

7. What stands out about the present in relation to the past?

The absence of mass movements like those that characterized the U.S. in the 1930s and the 1960s and early 1970s, or that characterize Latin America today; this despite a legitimacy crisis not seen in the U.S. since the last days of Richard Nixon. For the first time since the mid-1970s, the political establishment in the U.S. is rent by numerous internal fractures, but there is no significant pressure coming from social movements in the streets.

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