Making sense of social movements

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This book is about social movements, or rather about the ways in which we can make sense of them sociologically. I review the main strands of sociological thought on movements and suggest some new pathways for development. I explain how I plan to tackle this task shortly. Before doing so, however, I address a number of more basic questions:

- What are social movements?
- Why are they important, sociologically?
- What is the sociology of social movements about?

It is only when we have answered these questions that we can progress to the broader concerns of the book as a whole.

**What are social movements?**

As with any sociological phenomenon there is no neat answer to this question. We can find a relatively easy way in, however, by considering some examples of movements. There are many to pick from, some of which will be quite familiar to many people. We might include:

- the women’s movement or feminism;
- the labour and trade union movements;
- fascist movements;
- anti-fascist and anti-racist movements;
- the anti-psychiatry and psychiatric survivor movements;
- nationalist movements;
- the (Polish) Solidarity movement;
- the environmental or green movement;
- pro- and anti-abortion movements;
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- animal rights movements;
- the peace movement.

The list could go on but we have enough examples to take the next crucial step of considering the properties that these movements share and which make them social movements. This is where the difficulties begin. Many definitions have been offered in the literature but all are problematic. Some are too broad, such that they include phenomena which we would not wish to call social movements, and yet any attempt to narrow the definition down seems destined to exclude certain movements or at least the range of their forms and activities. In addition, every definition includes terms which themselves require definition. We would all agree that social movements are ‘collective’ ventures, for example, but what makes a venture count as collective? Is it a matter of numbers? If so, how many? Is it a matter of a type of interconnection between people, an organization or network? If so, how is that interconnection itself defined? Does ‘wearing the badge’ and ‘buying the T-shirt’ make one part of a movement or must one attend monthly meetings and engage in protest? And if the latter, what counts as protest? Would wearing the aforementioned badge count as a protest or must one stand in a group of three or more people waving a placard? There can be no decisive answers to these questions. Social movements manifest what Wittgenstein (1953) refers to as a ‘family resemblance’. Each movement shares some features in common with some other movements, without any feature being both sufficiently inclusive and sufficiently exclusive to demarcate and identify the set. What all movements share in common they tend to share with things other than movements and yet those characteristics which are unique to some are not shared by all. Even within the same movement we find diversity, and all movements change. Furthermore, we cannot define the terms of our definition, other than arbitrarily, because ‘collective’, ‘protest’ and other such terms, like ‘social movement’ itself, belong to our everyday language and derive meaning from their diverse uses in specific contexts. Sometimes they are used this way, sometimes that. Their definition obeys the ‘fuzzy logic’ of social practice (Bourdieu 1992a). This does not mean that we cannot or should not opt for arbitrary closure, for the purposes of specific projects. Precise definition is necessary to scientific research. But it does preclude a precise definition that will work for general purposes.

Having said this, we cannot dispense with general definitions altogether. Though they may beg more questions than they answer, they at least introduce us to the movements ‘family’ and allow us to reflect upon the sorts of characteristics, as well as the divergences and differences, we can expect to find within this family. They raise questions and pose problems, thereby enabling us to begin the process of reflecting upon and analytically dissecting movements. With these purposes in mind I will briefly consider four important definitions. The first is from Blumer:
Social movements can be viewed as collective enterprises seeking to establish a new order of life. They have their inception in a condition of unrest, and derive their motive power on one hand from dissatisfaction with the current form of life, and on the other hand, from wishes and hopes for a new system of living. The career of a social movement depicts the emergence of a new order of life.

(Blumer 1969: 99)

A few points need to be drawn out of this definition. First, Blumer defines movements as ‘collective enterprises’, that is to say, they entail social agents working together in various ways, sharing in a common project. Nobody would seriously disagree with this clause of Blumer’s definition. As Blumer himself acknowledges, however, many or most phenomena in the social world are collective, such that being so is hardly definitive of movements. To the notion of collective enterprises, therefore, he adds both that movements emerge out of dissatisfaction with a ‘form of life’ and that they seek to establish a new form of life. This reference to the establishment of a new form of life is important, assumedly, in order to distinguish movements from forms of collective action, such as panics or mass hysteria, which react to conditions of collective discontent but do not seek to rebuild social life in such a way as to resolve whatever is at the root of this problem. Again, many movement analysts would agree with this clause. The notion that movements arise out of unrest and dissatisfaction, however, at least hints at a central controversy in the literature. Many contemporary movement analysts, as we will soon learn, are very sceptical of the notion that there is a direct link between dissatisfaction and movement emergence. Finally, note Blumer’s use of the term ‘career’. This is a central concept in the symbolic interactionist tradition to which he belongs. It indicates that movements follow a temporal trajectory, that they do indeed ‘move’ or change.

At one level, Blumer’s is a very broad and inclusive definition. Both political parties and religious movements may fit within its remit, for example. This accords with some strands in the literature. Certain central papers and studies do focus upon either parties or religious cults (for example, Michels 1949; Snow et al. 1980). There are other strands in the literature, however, where movements are sharply differentiated from both religions and parties (for example, Offe 1985; Byrne 1997). From this point of view Blumer’s definition would be too inclusive. On the other hand, Blumer’s definition seemingly excludes more conservative and reactionary movements from its remit, that is, groups who resist change and attempt to maintain the status quo. At least some work has been done on these types of movements, and the question therefore arises whether Blumer is not too exclusive in his definition. As noted above, there is no correct answer to these questions of exclusiveness and inclusiveness. What is more important is that we appreciate the complexities that are glossed by this seemingly straightforward concept,
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‘social movements’. We do not need a simple definition of movements if we remain alert to the problems that any such definition would create.

The second definition we can consider comes from Eyerman and Jamison:

Social movements are . . . best conceived of as temporary public spaces, as moments of collective creation that provide societies with ideas, identities, and even ideals.

(Eyerman and Jamison 1991: 4)

This definition adds at least two further points to that of Blumer. First, it specifies more clearly that movements are a source of creativity and that what they tend to create are identities, ideas and even ideals. Second, Eyerman and Jamison make reference to ‘public spaces’, a phrase which is more or less equivalent to the notion of a ‘public sphere’. This is an interesting and useful clause in the definition as it conjures an image of previously privatized individuals being drawn into a public debate over matters of common concern. It raises certain problems, however, partly because the concept of the public sphere is itself contentious (see Calhoun 1994) and partly because we can imagine esoteric movements and secret societies which are by no means ‘public’ in the full-blown sense of the word. Indeed, within the environmental movements that Eyerman and Jamison themselves have studied, the role that science has played in defining otherwise often invisible problems has meant that a good deal of debate has been esoteric and relatively inaccessible for the public (Jamison et al. 1990; Beck 1992). If we wanted to pick further at Eyerman and Jamison’s definition we might question their emphasis upon the temporary nature of movements. This not only raises the inevitable and unanswerable question of how long we mean by ‘temporary’, it also invites the response that even those movements we still call ‘new social movements’ (e.g. environmentalism, post-sixties feminism, etc.) are all in their late forties now and hardly seem temporary.

In contrast to the emphasis upon temporariness in Eyerman and Jamison’s definition, our third definition, from Tarrow, emphasizes the relative durability of movements:

Contentious politics occurs when ordinary people, often in league with more influential citizens, join forces in confrontation with elites, authorities and opponents . . . When backed by dense social networks and galvanized by culturally resonant, action-oriented symbols, contentious politics leads to sustained interaction with opponents. The result is the social movement.

(Tarrow 1998: 2)

This identification of ‘sustained interaction with opponents’ is intended to distinguish social movements from singular protest events, while also linking them to protest, and thus does not contradict the notion that they might be temporary when judged from a longer term perspective. They exist for a
longer duration than the individual protest events in which they engage but not for as long as certain other forms of organization or institution. Duration is not the only noteworthy feature of Tarrow’s definition, however. He adds a number of useful points. First, he makes reference to social networks, consolidating our sense of the collective nature of movements by specifying how they are collectivized. Moreover, he pushes the notion of the cultural element mentioned by Eyerman and Jamison, in the form of ideas, identities and ideals, by suggesting that these have a direct function within the context of struggle. The culture created by movements ‘backs’ and otherwise ‘supports’ their struggle. Finally, and somewhat more controversially, he specifies ‘elites, authorities and opponents’ who are confronted in struggle. This is a useful clause, in some respects, as it aids our imagination in trying to think about what resistance to ‘the status quo’ might look like. One can readily visualize movements struggling against real individuals and groups, such as their bosses or the police. However, many contemporary movements struggle against more abstract targets, which are not so easily identified in this way: e.g. ‘institutionalized racism’ or ‘patriarchy’. Such targets are always embodied, often in the behaviour of specific agents, but they do not always assume the form of an ‘opponent’. Many contemporary movements involve at least a partial focus upon the complicity of their own participants in unacceptable states of affairs, for example. They attempt to initiate social change by way of self-change. The anti-psychiatry movement of the 1960s, for example, involved psychiatrists turning back upon and criticizing their own role in processes of social control, and attempting to transform their practice (Crossley 1998a). Similarly, black and feminist consciousness raising has focused upon the complicity of women and blacks in their own subordination, building new ways of acting and thinking (Rowbotham 1973). Finally, a strong strand of both the animal rights and environmental movements has identified the way in which changes in ordinary, everyday behaviour can make a strong contribution towards achieving change. The notion of ‘opponents’ and ‘elites’ who are opposed should be treated with caution therefore.

This point also problematizes the concept of protest. Do all movements seek to bring about change by way of protest? Is that all that they do? The work of Melucci (1986, 1996) is particularly interesting in relation to this question as he has sought out and explored the manifold ‘experiments in living’ and alternative forms of practice that so-called ‘new social movements’ engage in when they are not protesting (see also Crossley 1999b). Movements do much besides and sometimes instead of protesting, Melucci argues, such that protest can be a poor indicator of the life or existence of a movement. Blumer (1969) takes this one step further when he suggests that some movements consist of little more than a ‘cultural drift’, that is, a discernible and coherent yet decentralized and unorganized shift in particular ways of thinking, acting and perceiving. Drifts are ‘movements’ but they
entail no protest. Again, then, although protest is inevitably going to be central in our attempt to make sense of social movements, we must be careful not to pre-empt our understanding of the latter in terms of the former. It is also worth adding here, as Tarrow’s definition suggests, that we can have protests without movements, such that our understanding of the latter should not be allowed to pre-empt our attempts to understand the former.

Protest is also central to our final definition. Della Porta and Diani argue that social movements are:

1 informal networks, based on
2 shared beliefs and solidarity, which mobilise about
3 conflictual issues, through
4 the frequent use of various forms of protest.

(Della Porta and Diani 1999: 16)

This definition agrees with that of Tarrow insofar as it highlights networks, protest and conflict. It adds a further point, however, only alluded to by Tarrow, concerning shared beliefs and solidarity. At one level this clause of their definition expresses a truism. Members of any movement, in order to qualify as such, must presumably subscribe to a set of beliefs which are distinct from those of the wider population and sufficiently homogeneous for us to describe them as those of a single movement. Furthermore, those who subscribe to those beliefs must feel some degree of affinity with others who do so, relative to those who don’t, at least if they hold those beliefs with any degree of passion. Nevertheless, as the aforementioned notion of public spheres suggests, movements may be sites of argument and internal disagreement. Movement members often disagree and fall out.

It may be responded here that a certain amount of tacit agreement between movement participants is required in order for them to disagree and that this is what marks them out. They must at least agree over what they are in disagreement about. However, the same is true with respect to the relation of the movement to wider society. The arguments which a movement levels at the social order it opposes only have any leverage, insofar as they do, because they assume widely shared assumptions and beliefs. Anti-nuclear protestors, for example, assume that others share their desire to avoid mass destruction and perhaps also their mistrust of political and military elites. Similarly, feminist and black campaigners assume that the wider public aspire to the value of justice and equality. Thus, the sharing of basic assumptions is by no means exclusive to members of a movement, and is always, as in all social relations, a matter of degree. In addition, disagreements within movements can create schisms and conflicts which are no less vehement, and perhaps more so, than that between the movement and the wider society. One need only have been accosted by the members of a specific factional group within a movement and informed to ignore the dogmatism or whatever of another faction to see this. Koopmans
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(1993) picks up on this point when he argues that: ‘Social movements are characterised by a low degree of institutionalisation, high heterogeneity, a lack of clearly defined boundaries and decision making structures, a volatility matched by few other social phenomena’ (Koopmans 1993: 637); and Offe (1985) is similarly suggestive of it when he argues that social movements are condemned to less institutionalized forms of political involvement because they lack the internal homogeneity for them to be able to engage in binding negotiations. Whatever ‘leaders’ they may have, he notes, have no mandate to talk on behalf of the movement as a whole because they cannot assume that fellow movement activists share their specific perspective on events. This is not to say that solidarity is never evident in movements but to suggest, rather, that we cannot take it for granted as a stable and self-evident feature. To return to Blumer’s point, we need to bear in mind that movements are in movement and that their characteristics will consequently change.

None of the definitions we have considered is watertight but then we could not expect this. As I have said, social movements share a family resemblance rather than a fixed essence and their definition inevitably rests upon the fuzzy logic of ordinary language use. I hope that my brief discussion of these various definitions has not been in vain, however. Both the definitions discussed and the problems identified with them should have served to bring the issue of social movements alive and into question for us. With this task achieved we can turn to our next question.

Why are social movements important, sociologically?

Though there are doubtless many reasons, I will focus upon three. In the first instance, social movements are extremely prevalent in contemporary western societies. Evidence of their activities is everywhere. Protests are one very obvious example of this. One can seldom open a newspaper or turn on the TV news without being informed of an act of protest somewhere in the world. On the day that I sat down to write this opening chapter, for example, my local radio station was reporting a story of a 24-year-old woman, calling herself ‘Fungus’, who had climbed naked into a tree in protest at the building of a new airport runway. She had cocooned herself in a large polythene bag and padlocked herself by the neck to the tree because she and her fellow protestors claimed the new runway would destroy the habitat of local wildlife. In a fashion now common among ‘eco-warriors’, she and her associates had initially resisted the runway by constructing occupied tree-houses and underground tunnels in the path of the workmen who were to clear the ground for the runway, but the residents of this ‘protest village’ had been evicted by this morning and Fungus’s act of defiance was a final symbolic gesture. This is one incident but many others, equally dramatic, were beamed into my home by the media in the same year: e.g. a
hunger strike by an imprisoned animal rights activist; the accompanying threat by his colleagues in the Animal Liberation Front that they planned to assassinate ten well-known vivisectionists if he died; a ‘Carnival Against Capitalism’ which ended in rioting and trapped London’s stockmarket traders in their buildings; a series of attacks on fields of genetically modified crops; sabotage of a nuclear submarine; and regular road blockages by truckers protesting at VAT on fuel, which culminated in a week-long blockade of fuel depots that almost brought UK society to a halt.

In addition to protest, movements permeate the smaller crevices of our lifeworld in a multitude of ways. Most social science students, for example, will at some time have confronted the ‘nature or nurture?’ question in relation to specific aspects of behaviour, such as gender roles. For some this may have seemed like a formal academic exercise but it can hardly have escaped the attention of many that these debates were provoked by the work of feminist writers, that is, writers who belong to a social movement and who have brought their movement concerns to bear in their academic work. Similarly, many students will at one time or another have had to confront the choice of whether to use female or male pronouns in their work, and ‘he or she’ will be aware that this dilemma has been provoked by the work of feminist authors who have sought to challenge the dominant masculine norm.1 When writing up some work I have done on mental health movements, to give another example, I was struck at my own uncertainty over what to call my ‘subjects’. I could hardly call them ‘patients’ or ‘the mentally ill’ when an integral aspect of their struggle had been to shift conceptions of their experiences and behaviours away from such labels. Finally, outside the academy, many of us have cultivated the habits of, for example, taking a portion of our household rubbish to recycling centres, using our cars less or buying an anti-perspirant which does not contain harmful CFC gasses. This is a small gesture but it is one very much shaped by the activities of the environmental movement. Indeed, it is an activity of the environmental movement. Part of the ‘movement’ in social movements is a transformation in the habits, including linguistic and basic domestic habits, that shape our everyday lives.

This prevalence makes social movements important for sociology because it demonstrates that movements are an important constituent element in the world that we seek to investigate and explain. A science of society and social relations can no more omit to study movements than it could the family, economy or state.

At a more specific level, movements are important because they are key agents for bringing about change within societies. Immediately this conjures up an image of revolution or major legislative change. This happens but it is comparatively rare and the kinds of changes movements achieve

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1 I have tended to opt here for the feminine norm.
are more often local and cultural in nature (McAdam 1994). Movements problematize the ways in which we live our lives and, as noted above, call for changes in our habits of thought, action and interpretation. More to the point, they are, in themselves, manifestations of social change. Societies are not static or stable. They flow. And social movements are key currents within this flow. Not that changes are always intended. Movement actions trigger chains of events which cannot always be foreseen or controlled and they sometimes provoke backlashes and other unintended responses. These processes of change and movement are important from a sociological point of view because the discipline revolves around questions of stability and change: the problem of order and the problem of transformation. Social movements are not the only cause of change – or, for that matter, in the case of conservative movements, order – but it would be foolhardy to ignore them if these issues are of importance to us.

There is another aspect to this question of change. The question of change, particularly change by way of movement politics, is a question about the difference which social agents themselves can make to the various structural dimensions of their life, a question about the form and distribution of power in society and the adequacy and limits of democracy. Social movements are, in effect, natural experiments in power, legitimation and democracy. Their existence, successes, failures and more generally their dynamics, though all incredibly difficult to read and interpret, allow us to gauge the workings of the broader political structures of our society. This is the third reason why movements are important.

**What is the ‘sociology’ of social movements about?**

Social movements, new and old, potentially raise a multitude of questions for sociologists. And as the field of movement analysis has grown more of these questions have been opened up. I could attempt to list these questions but any list would be incomplete. What is more relevant is the principle upon which we determine the issues. This too could be an issue of debate and disagreement but I believe that Neil Smelser speaks for many sociologists when he says:

> [Movements and protests] occur with regularity. They cluster in time; they cluster in certain cultural areas; they occur with greater frequency amongst certain social groupings . . . This skewing in time and place invites explanation: Why do collective episodes occur where they do, when they do, and in the ways they do?

(Smelser 1962: 1)

We could extend this point. Why do certain movements last? Why do some succeed where others fail? Why do some clusters of movements emerge at
certain points in time? However, the point is clear enough. The dynamics and properties of social movements or movement clusters are not random, even if their pattern and cause is not obvious, and the point of a sociological analysis is to get beneath the appearance of randomness to reveal the pattern and posit its explanation. This begs our next question.

**How do social scientists explain and make sense of social movements?**

This is the key question for this book as a whole and I cannot hope to do justice to it in a few paragraphs. However, it would be useful briefly to map out the terrain. For purposes of exposition we can split the field into four camps, divided along two axes (see Figure 1.1). The two columns in Figure 1.1 map out a well-worn distinction between American and European schools of movement analysis. Any attempt to distinguish these two is likely both to offend and to sound over-simplified but for purposes of exposition I suggest the following. The European trajectory has been more firmly framed by the Marxist/Hegelian tradition of the philosophy of history, while the American tradition, if equally indebted to Marx in certain respects, has adopted a more empirical, scientific and, to a degree, empiricist frame.

Even when doggedly empirical, European debates have typically been as much about the constitutive structure and type of society in which modern movements emerge, the relation of those movements to that society and their ‘historical role’ therein, as they have been about the movements themselves. There has been an assumption that societies centre upon certain key conflicts or contradictions and that these conflicts generate particular movements, perhaps even a singular key movement, which seeks to address them. European scholars have asked, ‘What are the key conflicts of our time?’ and, ‘Who are the parties to them?’ In the American literature, by contrast, one finds reference to a vast range of different movements and groups, from the black civil rights movement to Mothers Against Drunk Driving, and

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**Figure 1.1** Four traditions of movement analysis
there is much less concern to pin these movements to the dialectics of history or a specific type of society. Rather, researchers have sought out the specific empirical conditions which facilitate and inhibit the development and flourishing of movements.

The main focus of the recent European literature has been the so-called ‘new social movements’, that is, the various movements which emerged in western societies in the wake of the 1960s, including environmentalism, the peace movement, second-wave feminism, animal rights, anti-psychiatry, etc. This notion of ‘new social movements’ is a ‘post-Marxist’ notion. Much of European political sociology and social theory during the second half of the twentieth century was a debate with Marx about, for example, the likelihood of proletarian revolution, the reasons for its non-materialization, etc. New social movement theories are an outgrowth of this. They entail a view that contemporary western societies have outgrown the model of capitalist society suggested by Marx, rejecting the priority he affords to class struggle and to classes as agents of historical change. New social movement theorists attempt to identify the central conflicts and movements definitive of the new era.

Figure 1.1 maps out a parallel paradigm shift within the American trajectory, from ‘collective behaviour’ approaches to resource mobilization and political process approaches. Contemporary retrospective accounts of what the collective behaviour approach entailed tend towards a gruesome caricature, reducing the model to little more than a foil for the newer theories. I do not subscribe to this straw model but it has uses so I will briefly outline it. According to many contemporary accounts (e.g. Oberschall 1973; Tilly 1978; McAdam 1982; Jenkins 1983; McAdam et al. 1988), the collective behaviour approach:

- portrays movement emergence as a reflex response to ‘grievances’, deprivations’, ‘anomie’, ‘structural strains’ or other such forms of hardship. The stereotypical collective behaviour theorist believes that objective hardships are both a necessary and a sufficient cause of protest and movement formation;
- portrays the protests and movements triggered by these hardships as irrational psychological responses; manifestations of ‘mob psychology’ or collective hysteria;
- portrays those who become involved in these ‘mobs’ as (previously) isolated individuals who are often not very well integrated into society;
- lumps social movements together with other assorted forms of ‘collective behaviour’, such as fashions, crazes and panics, without any due consideration for their distinctness and properly ‘political’ nature.

Following Tilly’s (1978) lead, many critics of the collective behaviour approach seem to view it as Durkheimian in inspiration, given Durkheim’s interest in both collective psychology and the causes and consequences of
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anomie. There has therefore been a fair degree of Durkheim bashing in the more recent literature.

The critique of this straw model of collective behaviour theory has been multifaceted. On one hand it has involved straightforward empirical refutation. Many studies have shown, for example, that objective increases in hardship do not lead to increases in protest or movement activity (e.g. Snyder and Tilly 1972). Indeed, protests very often seem to increase during periods of reform and economic upturn (Eisinger 1973). In a more theoretical vein, this observation has been bolstered by the claim that strains and conflicts are a constant factor in social life and, as such, cannot explain protests and movements, which are variable in their rates of both occurrence and intensity. For example, there were structural conflicts and tensions between blacks and whites in the USA long before the rise of the civil rights movement. In addition, it is noted that studies have failed to show that movements recruit from the less well integrated members of society. On the contrary, movements often seem to form around pre-existing networks. The black civil rights movement in the USA formed around and out of the black churches, for example. In a different vein, theorists have challenged the tendency to view movement behaviour and beliefs as ‘irrational’. Against this it is argued that we can only understand movement activity if we assume the behaviour of activists to be rational. This point hints at a further source of disagreement with the collective behaviour approach, which is more normative in orientation. The new American paradigm of movement theory emerged, like new social movement theories, in the wake of the struggles of the 1960s, and many of its advocates had taken part in those struggles. They therefore tend to have a sympathetic attitude towards movements and want to develop theories which are helpful to them and do not brand them as strange or irrational.

The emergence of the new replacement paradigm has come in a number of stages. Early developments tended to centre upon two key elements. First, a rational actor model of the social agent was appropriated, along with an economistic focus upon exchange relations in social life and the effects of the movement of resources between agents. Second, a structural ‘network’ model of social relations and social life was adopted. With these elements movement theorists from within the ‘resource mobilization’ approach were able to examine the balance of costs, rewards and incentives that provided agents with the motivation to become involved in struggle, and they were able to focus upon the block mobilization of whole communities. Many features of this resource mobilization approach have persisted in American movement analysis but by the 1980s they had been added to by a consideration of the ways in which political systems and processes variously open up and close down opportunities for protest, thereby affecting the flow of activism itself. Rational actors, it was argued, will tend to act when the opportunities for doing so effectively are greatest. This insight
has provided the basis for a later development of the new paradigm, sometimes referred to as the political process approach.

The political process approach itself has undergone some degree of change too, however, in recent years. Many of its advocates have noted its neglect of such issues as identity, emotion, culture and various social-psychological factors. Thus the new paradigm has seemingly entered a third phase, focused upon these particular issues. Some writers have portrayed this as a dialogue between the American paradigm and the new social movements paradigm from Europe. That paradigm too focuses upon identity and culture. However, it is as true to say that this third phase of the new American paradigm involves a partial return to some of the more fruitful themes and issues of the collective behaviour approach. The repressed is returning.

The argument and plan of this book

One of the main tasks of this book is to provide a relatively clear introduction to the field of movements analysis. I will be going over the positions and developments discussed above, in detail. However, introduction and exposition are only one half of the picture. I also intend to use the book to advance a number of claims about movement theory and to make a contribution to it. My position is summed up in Chapter 9, but a few pointers would be instructive at this stage. In the first instance I seek to contribute to the growing body of criticism directed at the ‘new’ American paradigm. I have three broad lines of critique, each centred upon rational actor theory (RAT).

The first concerns its intrinsic plausibility. There is something undeniable and very attractive about RAT. Social agents do, for the most part, pursue specific goals in a purposive manner, avoiding unnecessary costs and, where possible, maximizing their gains. Furthermore, recognizing this opens the door for a systematic and predictive approach to explanatory theory. Having said that, one would be hard pushed to find a social theory which denied this. Most theories make some such claim or presupposition. What distinguishes RAT is a range of more problematic assumptions which frame this claim. I identify and critique these assumptions in Chapter 4.

My second key criticism is that the minimalism of the RAT model precludes many important issues from analysis, including the origin and distribution of preferences, movement identities and culture, and the role of emotion. Rational actor theory is not capable of addressing these issues and recommends that we do not clutter our analysis with them. Such minimalism can have advantages. It is attractive because it promises parsimony and prediction. In the final analysis, however, it proves too minimal to explain anything; it requires us to ignore a great deal of empirical and phenomenological data; and it ultimately has to become quite convoluted to address even the simplest of questions.
Although some theories of movements have been affected by these problems of rational choice theory, many have recognized them and sought to correct them. However, this has created a third problem. In seeking to compensate for the deficiencies of rational choice theory, movement analysts have tended to violate the ‘sacred’ assumptions of the approach, thereby leaving themselves in an ambiguous and unspecified theoretical limbo, somewhere between RAT and a more adequate sociological model. One cannot modify RAT without abandoning it, in my view, and as I have no equivocation about abandoning it this is what I suggest that we do.

One of the key emphases of the new American paradigm has been ‘structure’. In practice this has translated variously as ‘network’ and as ‘structure of political opportunities’, a reflection upon the institutional political arrangements in society which variously facilitate and constrain political activity. These ideas are important but it is my contention that they entail a very thin notion of ‘structure’ and that they fail to connect with broader and wider conceptions of the structure of society. There are two very clear senses in which this is so. First, the emphasis of much of the research in the tradition is on political structures, narrowly defined, to the detriment of a proper consideration of other structural fields of society or, more broadly, of the differentiated nature of contemporary societies. While many of the more recent writers in the paradigm acknowledge the importance of the media, for example, they fail to reflect upon the fact that the media field is a distinct and relatively autonomous social field with its own ‘rules’, dynamics, agents, rhythms, etc. For this reason it has tended to be overlooked that political opportunity structures are but one set of opportunity structures for movements, alongside media structures and also, of course, legal, academic and many other types of structure. I attempt to remedy this problem, in the book, by reference to Bourdieu’s concept of social fields (see below). Second, the new paradigm, on account of its critique of the collective behaviour approach, has tended to demonize the issue of stresses and grievances to the point where it has had very little to say with regard to them at all. This is problematic on a number of levels but most particularly because it detracts attention away from the underlying structural patterns of society which give rise to specific sorts of movements at specific times. In fact, it has seemingly detracted attention away from any such deeper notion of social structure and any attempt to link movement formation to the ‘contradictions’, ‘stresses’ or ‘conflicts’ generated by a particular societal type. The theorists of new social movements, whether wrong or right in their claims, represent an important corrective to this and I explore their work, in Chapter 8, as a way of demonstrating this. The central claim of the new social movements theorists is that societies of the post 1960s era have entered a new stage of development in their history in which the contradictions which dogged earlier eras have been displaced into new forms of conflict.
It is also my intention, in this book, to open up the space for a possible re-evaluation of the collective behaviour approach. It will be apparent that I am not persuaded by the straw model of collective behaviour described above. There are many collective behaviour approaches and by no means all of them are guilty as charged. More to the point, some still have a great deal to offer movement theory. In particular I believe that Smelser’s ‘value-added’ model of movement emergence provides the most adequate frame by which to think of the various interconnecting conditions which lead to movement emergence. I also believe that Blumer’s account of ‘social unrest’ and movement formation offers a strong starting place for thinking about questions of movement culture, identity, emotion, and their various connections to purposive social action. Finally, I offer a reassessment of Durkheim. Tilly (1978) claims to find no use for Durkheim in his attempts to make sense of protest and many have toed this line, never uttering the ‘D word’ except in contempt. It is surprising, however, just how many Durkheimian notions, unacknowledged as such, seem to have found a place within contemporary debates. Concerns with solidarity and collective identity have a very obvious Durkheimian feel, for example, while, as Barker (1999) has noted, the new and important concept of ‘cycles of contention’, which identifies those creative periods in history when conflict ‘speeds up’ and new political actors and themes emerge, bears more than a superficial resemblance to Durkheim’s ([1912] 1915, [1924] 1974) ‘collective effervescence’. Durkheim has been read very one-sidedly in social movement theory, as a prophet of anomie and social disintegration. This book seeks, albeit in small measure, to draw out his other side and thereby to reveal his considerable potential for movement analysis.

In addition to reviving these old figures, I seek to draw in the ideas of a more recent social theorist: Pierre Bourdieu. The origin of this aspect of my argument, if I am honest, is partly accidental. My own first attempts at empirical research in the movements field, on anti-psychiatric and mental health movements, were conducted at a time when I was far more familiar with Bourdieu’s theories than those outlined in this book, hence my own way of thinking about movements tended to follow the path that his theory laid out. Notwithstanding this accident of birth, however, having caught up with movement theory I remain convinced that Bourdieu’s framework has much to offer movement analysis. Indeed, it is my contention that, though Bourdieu seldom deals directly with the issue of movements, his theory of practice provides the most fruitful conceptual framework for anchoring the sociology of social movements and allows us to overcome many of the key problems that are evident in the more usual approaches. A Bourdieu-inspired approach to movement analysis has much to learn from the other major movement perspectives, and it is my intention to draw out just exactly what that is, but it offers a much more cogent and coherent theoretical starting place for movement analysis than these other perspectives, and I intend to show that too.
I examine Bourdieu’s work in the final chapter of the book, having discussed the various alternatives in the chapters which precede it. My aim, in this final chapter, is twofold and has a twofold bearing on the arguments elsewhere in the book. First, I argue in that chapter that a great many of the problems of the various other theories discussed in the book revolve around questions of agency and structure, and I suggest that Bourdieu offers us a framework for resolving these problems. In this respect Bourdieu’s work is posited as a solution to persistent theoretical problems in the movements field. However, second, I argue that Bourdieu’s own work on movements manifests many of the problems which movement theories have identified and criticized, and I thus argue the case for improving Bourdieu’s own account of movements through an incorporation of many of the ideas discussed earlier in the book. Thus, while Bourdieu’s approach may suffice to ground movement analysis, it must also be prepared to learn from it. This is not merely a matter of improving on Bourdieu, however. What I also seek to show in the final chapter is that Bourdieu’s relatively simple theoretical framework allows us to pull together a range of scattered insights that we will have encountered in the main body of the book, into a persuasive, parsimonious and coherent perspective. By centring my conclusion on Bourdieu, in other words, and building what for the sake of argument we can call a ‘Bourdieuian’ approach to social movement analysis, I seek to pull together the many insights of movement analysis discussed elsewhere in the book, without lapsing into an unhelpful and incoherent eclectic mish-mash. I use Bourdieu’s theory of practice to give structure to the diverse insights I want to hold on to. There is a real danger in ‘post-RAT’ movement analysis that theory will give way to eclecticism and empiricism (i.e. the bundling together of interesting empirical observations) and I hope to pre-empt this by way of Bourdieu.

The chapter plan for the book is as follows. Chapters 2 and 3 focus upon two of the main advocates of the collective behaviour approach: Herbert Blumer and Neil Smelser. I am critical of both but argue that each has an invaluable contribution to make to contemporary thought about movements, which has been overlooked. This is followed by four chapters which explore various aspects of the new American paradigm. I start, in Chapter 4, with a discussion of RAT and its ‘collective action problem’. Then, in Chapters 5 and 6, I discuss the basic ideas of the resource mobilization and political process approaches. Finally, in Chapter 7, I consider three very important concepts which have come out of this approach: ‘repertoires of contention’, ‘frames’ and ‘cycles of contention’. This gives the book a very American bias. In Chapter 8, however, I offer a sustained engagement with one key version of new social movements theory, that of Jurgen Habermas (1987), in an effort to bring the concerns and issues of the European schools of movement analysis more squarely into the picture. The details of the final chapter of the book, Chapter 9, have already been discussed.