CHAPTER 14

Culture and Social Movements*

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READING INTRODUCTION

McAdam presents a good example of focusing on the questions discussed in the introduction to this section, explaining: why groups form, why they adopt the characteristics they do, what factors shape their success and failure, and how cultures broadly influential in their societies shape their identity and opportunities. Key among the points in his analysis is the concept of "frames." McAdam uses this term to refer to packets of shared assumptions through which particular social movements can be categorized. Frames also highlight common elements through which movements' purposes can be understood. A core belief of the civil rights movement, for example, was that American society was denying African Americans the equality in which the broader society professed to believe. Subsequent movements, such as women's and gay rights movements, have largely adopted the same approach as their members pursue their goals. Social movements, in McAdam's analysis, are embedded in the cultures within which they act and should be understood in relation to both the broader culture and each other across time.

READING TEXT

Over the past two decades, the study of social movements has been among the most productive and intellectually lively subfields within sociology. But, as with all emergent paradigms, the recent renaissance in social movement studies has highlighted certain aspects of the phenomenon while ignoring others. Specifically, the dominance, within the United States, of the "resource mobilization" and "political process" perspectives has privileged the political, organizational,

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and network/structural aspects of social movements while giving the more cultural or ideational dimensions of collective action short shrift.

From a sociology of knowledge perspective, the recent ignorance of the more cultural aspects of social movements is the result of the rejection of the classical collective behavior paradigm, which emphasized the role of shared beliefs and identities but whose hints of irrationality and pathology (Klapp 1969; Lang and Lang 1961; Smelser 1962) made it unattractive to a new generation of scholars whose own experiences led them to view social movements as a form of rational political action. Whatever the reason, the absence of any real emphasis on ideas, ideology, or identity has created, within the United States, a strong “rationalist” and “structural” bias in the current literature on social movements. At the most macro level of analysis, social movements are seen to emerge in response to the “expansion in political opportunities” that grant formal social movement organizations (SMOs) and movement entrepreneurs the opportunity to engage in successful “resource mobilization.” At the micro level, individuals are drawn into participation not by the force of the ideas or even individual attitudes but as the result of their embeddedness in associational networks that render them “structurally available” for protest activity. Until recently, “culture,” in all of its manifestations, was rarely invoked by American scholars as a force in the emergence and development of social movements. The renewed interest in the topic has been spurred, in part, by the European “new social movement” perspective, which has made cultural and cognitive factors central to the study of social movements (Brand 1990; Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Melucci 1985, 1989).

This chapter broadens the discourse among movement scholars by focusing on some of the links between culture and social movements. Specifically, I address three broad topics: the cultural roots of social movements, the emergence and development of distinctive “movement cultures,” and the cultural consequences of social movements.

The Cultural Roots of Social Movements

The “structural bias” in movement studies is most evident in recent American work on the emergence of social movements and revolutions. With but a few exceptions, recent theorizing on the question has located the roots of social movements in some set of political, economic, or organizational factors. While acknowledging the importance of such factors, I add cultural factors and processes to this list as important constraints or facilitators of collective action. There are three distinct ways in which culture can be said to facilitate movement emergence.

Framing as an Act of Cultural Appropriation

Drawing on the work of Erving Goffman (1974), David Snow and various of his colleagues (Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1988) have developed the concept of “frame alignment processes” to describe the efforts by which organizers seek to join the cognitive orientations of individuals with those of social movement organizations. The task is to propound a view of the world that both