Book Review

Forms of Collective Action


Since 1990, the annual publication from the series Raisons Pratiques (edited by Louis Quéré) has become one of the most interesting French contributions to the study of social phenomena. The series explores topics invariably on the cutting edge of the social sciences – the social categories (Fradin, Quéré, Widmer, 1994), the emotions (Paperman, Ogien, 1995), and the regularity of action (Chauviré, Ogien, 2002) – calling on the latest developments of different disciplines. The volumes are also remarkable for sustaining a rich dialogue with English-speaking authors.

In the mid-eighties, the American sociologist David A. Snow and his students at the University of Texas started formulating the “frame perspective” (Snow, Rochford, Worden, Benford, 1986; Snow, Benford, 1992; Benford, Snow, 2000), which has since then undergone significant development. The characteristic of this approach is to study social movements as “signifying agents” that produce the meaning of activities related to labor, environmental, pacifist, or political mobilizations. Forms of Collective Action: Mobilizations in Public Arenas presents the frame perspective and discusses it from the French research standpoint. The volume’s origin was a seminar at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Paris), conducted by editors Daniel Cefaï, a sociologist, and Danny Trom, a political scientist, whose work relates extensively to social movements and American sociological theories.

As the editors argue, analysis of collective action and social movements has developed around three main axes: the Chicago School perspective on collective behavior (Robert E. Park, Herbert Blumer), the resource mobilization theory (Anthony Oberschall, Mayer N. Zald, John D. McCarthy), and the European perspective on the “new social movements” (Alain Touraine, Alberto Melucci, Jürgen Habermas). The proponents of the frame perspective consider the explanations in terms of goals, ideologies, or psychosocial
dynamics that these approaches offer insufficient to understand the organization of social movements. For them, the key is to be found in the “frames” (Goffman, 1974) that actors bring into play to interpret their reality. The research aims thus to identify the frames of collective action defined as “action-oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate the activities and campaigns of a social movement organization” (Cefaï and Trom, 2001, p. 28). Following this approach, many empirical studies have been produced and a vast spectrum of social movements (political, environmental, anti-nuclear, civil rights, homeless issues, and others) has been examined.

In nine papers, the authors successfully meet the challenge of presenting the theoretical and analytical contributions of the frame perspective while revealing its limitations and formulating ways of overcoming them.

Initially, the founders of the frame perspective were interested in the “alignment and fitting processes” through which the members of particular movements – Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism, Hare Krishna – adjust to each movement’s practices and ideology. From these origins, Snow traces the theoretical progression, based on empirical research, of the analytical approach he has developed with colleagues. He presents the relationship of this work to cultural analysis as well as its expected development in the areas of framing effects and frame emergence, production, and diffusion.

Cefaï offers a vast panorama of the sources, dimensions, and difficulties of the frame perspective. He establishes connections between the frame perspective and various approaches – resource mobilization theory, Erving Goffman’s frame analysis, and political opportunities and process theory – from which the American works draw and differ.

In the literature on collective action and social movements, Trom delineates a subjective and causal conception of motive; i.e. motives appear as mental sources of action. By contrast, a rereading of Charles Wright Mills’ 1940 paper leads Trom to regard motives as part of the activity structure, essential to identify the actions and to link them with the situations where they take place.

James Jasper wishes to thwart deterministic, instrumentalist, and rationalist visions of collective action, and to preserve the richness of human experience. He proposes integrating emotions into the analysis by paying attention to the rhetorical forms used during the mobilization activities.

Robert D. Benford and Scott A. Hunt bring together research on social problems and movements. In so doing, they expose rhetorical strategies of framing, counter-framing, and reframing through which collective ideologies and identities are produced.

Cefaï and Claudette Lafaye study the moral, civic, and political frames of a neighborhood association in Paris. In their paper, the frames are captured along with the “human texture” (experiences, relationships, practices, encounters, and gatherings) of the activities they organized.