1 Introduction: conceptualizing social movements

Indeed, I've heard it said that we should be glad to trade what we've so far produced for a few really good conceptual distinctions and a cold beer.

(American Sociologist, Erving Goffman, 1963, 261)

Erving Goffman's opening statement is his assessment of the field of sociological theory in the 1960s. This book is concerned with a subfield of sociology called 'social movement studies', which is multi-disciplinary, involving political scientists, economists, social psychologists, and human geographers. Modern social movement studies – which supplies the predominant conceptual framework for studying social movements and protest today – can be dated back to the early 1970s with theoretical developments in the US and Europe. Modern social movement studies however has an important predecessor in the shape of the field of collective behaviour (CB), a subfield of US sociology which claimed social movements and protest as its subject matter in the first part of the twentieth century, alongside the study of crowds, mobs, crazes, panics, fads, and fashions. CB reflected upon non-democratic movements, like fascism, and as such formed an understanding of social movements as the irrational expression of shared grievances, arising from deprivation or the alienating conditions of 'mass society'.

CB theorists, like the sociologist Herbert Blumer (1951 [1946]), made it clear that while much of the time social science concentrates upon questions of social order and reproduction, questions of social change are equally as important to study. Indeed, social movements have fascinated sociologists for decades because they open up the possibility of exploring the relationship between human action and social structures. Social movements are those collective efforts orientated towards social change that point to circumstances in which creative human action actually shapes and alters social structures, rather than being shaped by

them. The study of social movements therefore brings to our attention those moments when, as Karl Marx put it, 'people make history'.

Critical engagement with the way in which CB 'conceptualized' social movements laid the foundations for social movement studies as we know it today. By 'conceptualized', I refer to attempts to produce a 'general idea' of what 'social movements are' beyond the specificities of individual cases. This is important work to undertake for two reasons. First, cases of social movements are extremely varied. They vary historically and cross-culturally, and include movements campaigning for various 'rights' (civil, labour, women's, gay, disability, children, and so on); movements campaigning on behalf of the environment, peace, or animals; movements seeking specific political reforms or diffuse cultural and personal change; and movements contesting globalization, corporations, and capitalist social relations. This variation means that remaining at the level of empirical study can make it very difficult to see the general features and dynamics that social movements have in common. Secondly, constructing a general idea of what social movements are as a category is essential if we are to know that what we observe and study is a 'social movement' and does not belong instead to another category, like the 'political party', 'pressure group', or 'voluntary organization', for example, which have particular dynamics of their own.

Social movement studies

The rejection of early CB notions of social movements as 'irrational group behaviour' did not, however, lead to an alternative conceptualization that everyone could agree upon. Indeed, social movement studies has gone through several phases of conceptual development since its inception in the 1970s, which have largely come about through disagreement and debate. We can identify a number of rival perspectives arising throughout the history of the field, presented in figure 1.1.

Conceptual development in social movement studies has taken a 'dialectical' form, meaning that approaches have evolved through a conversation between opposing ideas. We will draw out and engage with these debates in the course of the book. Randall Collins (2001, 36) argues for example that developments have often come about when new generations of scholars focus upon points of contention in existing
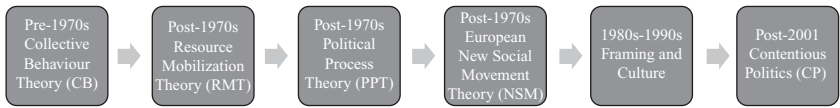
Figure 1.1
The chronological development of social movement studies.

theories, magnify their status, and embrace their opposite in order to create a 'new' perspective (Tarrow, 2004). This is why you will find that social movement studies is a field littered with conceptual 'dualisms' (binary oppositions). Where one approach stresses rationality, another 'rediscovers' emotion (Collins, 2001, 36). Where one approach stresses structural and political factors, another finds culture and social construction. Where one approach stresses strategies, another stresses identities, and so on and so forth. These dualisms are then written in to the 'story' of the social movements field, such that they achieve the status of 'real' distinctions in our conceptual thinking. In this book, the various chapters take these dualisms as a starting point for discussion, showing how thinking on social movements has shifted from one understanding to another. The point in doing so, however, is not to reinforce dualisms, but to deconstruct them in order to show *how* they create general ideas about 'what social movements are', which have their merits, but which are also problematic. This is the critical work that we will be doing in the chapters.

Focusing upon the disagreements and debates in social movement studies makes for a good story. The field, however, actually contains more agreement on conceptual questions than the story suggests (Collins, 2001, 37; Tarrow, 2004). Often, Collins (2001, 37) argues, it is the same people who are involved in prior perspectives and the rival perspectives that replace them. We will see this is the case for 'political process' theory and its critical development into the 'contentious politics' approach (see Chapter 4). Even when this is not the case, perspectives are often compatible at some level, or intended to be 'partial' (like 'resource mobilization' theory, Chapter 3). We will see in Chapter 4, for example, that when we set up the debate between the 'structuralists' and the 'constructionists' in social movement theory, we soon find out that no one who gets called a 'structuralist' really embraces the label themselves (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004a; Kurzman, 2004). In contemporary social movement studies, therefore, we can find some common ground, and some shared assumptions.

I suggest, in fact, that we can identify four 'conceptual distinctions' that have been drawn around the category of social movements through previous debates and are largely accepted in the field today. These conceptual distinctions shape our current understanding of 'what social movements are', and therefore, the kind of cases we study, and the kind of methodologies we use to study them. They are as follows:

(a) *Social movements are collective, organized efforts at social change, rather than individual efforts at social change.*

The first conceptual distinction tells us that a social movement is a form of *collective and organized* (rather than 'individual') action. This collective action has a particular orientation: it has the aim of producing *social change* (either for better or worse, depending on your viewpoint). This change can be directed at different aspects of society, for example political, ideological, social, economic, and cultural spheres. It can be a big change (like a revolution which transforms the whole of society's structures), or (what appear like) small changes (e.g. reform of a policy or law, or a change in cultural meanings). The key point is that the efforts to bring about this change must be *collective and organized* for a case to qualify as a social movement. Herbert Blumer therefore states that 'social movements can be viewed as collective enterprises seeking to establish a new order of life' (Blumer, 1951 [1946], 199). The way in which collective efforts are actually organized, however, has been a source of debate (which we will look at throughout the book). While some theorists point to the role of 'formal organizations' in pursuing social change (referring to 'social movement organizations' (SMOs), for example), others point to much more informal connections among social movement activists, often rooted in their pre-existing interpersonal relationships. Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani therefore describe a social movement as 'informal networks' (Della Porta and Diani, 1999, 16).

(b) *Social movements exist over a 'period of time' by engaging in a 'conflictual issue' with a 'powerful opponent', rather than being 'one-off' events.*

The second important distinction is between collective actions orientated towards social change that are momentary in nature (and that we might more accurately call 'protest events'), and collective actions orientated

towards social change that last over a period of time. Social movements
are the latter (Blumer, 1951 [1946]; Tarrow, 1998). They are *durable* efforts
at social change, not one-off protest events. Importantly, scholars in the
'political process' approach (that we look at in Chapter 4) suggest that
what social movements are doing over a period of time is to episodically
engage with a 'powerful opponent' over an issue of conflict. The nation
state and political institutions have been seen as the central opponents
for social movements. Sidney Tarrow therefore describes a social move-
ment as 'sustained interactions' between 'ordinary people, often in league
with more influential citizens…in confrontation with elites, authorities and
opponents' (Tarrow, 1998, 2).

(c) *The members of a social movement are not just working together,*
    but share a 'collective identity'.

The third distinctive feature of a social movement is that the people
who work together to achieve social change are not just cooperat-
ing, communicating, interacting, and so forth; they also share a
sense of themselves as a group who have a common understanding
of the problem and the solution. New social movement (NSM) theory
(which we look at in Chapter 5) therefore defines a social movement
on the basis of a shared 'collective identity'. A collective identity
involves a sense of 'we', against 'them' in a conflict over 'this', and
has been seen as an essential characteristic of a social movement
(Melucci, 1980). Mario Diani (1992, 13) therefore suggests that what
makes informal networks of people who mobilize around issues of
conflict into a 'social movement' is a 'shared collective identity', or
'shared beliefs and solidarity' (Della Porta and Diani, 1999, 16).

(d) *Social movements actively pursue change by employing protest.*

The employment of protest (acts of disruption or declarations of dis-
approval) in pursuit of their aim is the fourth distinctive feature of a
social movement (Della Porta and Diani, 1999, 16). Social movements,
for example, stage public 'protest events' like street demonstrations,
strikes, sit-ins, walkouts, occupations, vigils, and so on. Della Porta and
Diani (2006, 171–8) suggest that protest can be divided into three cat-
egories: *numbers* (e.g. a show of strength by the movement to express
the size of its support, like a mass demonstration, which also creates
an effective form of disruption); *damage* (e.g. causing damage by

committing acts of violence against property or persons, or inflicting economic damage on an employer through a strike, creating a material and symbolic effect); and *bearing witness* (e.g. carrying out acts that show a moral commitment to a cause, like civil disobedience, or ethical consumerism). Protest events are often what the public at large associate with social movements because they are the 'visible' signs that tell us that a collective effort at social change is underway.

Challenging conceptual distinctions

In this book, we will critically engage with these four conceptual distinctions. The main argument is that each of these distinctions is already the result of previous debate and challenge, and that they are now facing a fresh round of debate and challenge. The previous debates that have shaped conceptual thinking, and which we will explore in the course of the book, are:

- Can social movements be understood in psychological terms? For example, do social movements rely upon the existence of strains in society and the grievances that they cause people?
- Can social movements be understood in 'rational' terms? For example, do social movements rely upon strategy and rational calculations of success?
- Can social movements be understood as 'organizations'? For example, do they rely upon formal organization and the mobilization of tangible resources?
- Can social movements be understood in political terms? For example, do they target the nation state and political institutions and rely upon the 'political opportunities' they provide?

In Chapters 2–5, we will consider these debates and how they have shaped the ways in which social movements have been understood by different perspectives in the field. I also argue however that the conceptualizations which have resulted from these previous debates are now facing challenges of their own.

In Chapters 6–8, we will consider these challenges, which, I suggest, come from two main sources: first, new cases; and secondly, new contexts. By 'new', I do not always mean historically new (i.e. a product of

contemporary society), but also 'new' in the sense that social movement studies is starting to look at certain cases and contexts for the first time and which it traditionally ignored. The 'new' cases that will be considered in this book are:

- 'lifestyle movements', which involve individual lifestyle change as a mode of pursuing social change
- global social movements
- terrorism, and movements involving political violence.

The new contexts that will be considered are:

- globalization (specifically capitalist globalization as it has evolved since 1989)
- the rise of 'new media' (meaning 'information and communication technologies', hereafter ICTs, which include mobile communications and social media)
- non-conventional contexts of study, like repressive, authoritarian regimes in which collective action orientated towards change is not tolerated.

These new cases and contexts problematize, stretch, and challenge the four conceptual distinctions drawn around social movements, and will provide us with ways to critically engage with them. We will, for example, question the first distinction between individual and collective efforts at change (by looking at lifestyle movements in Chapter 5, and protest in non-conventional contexts in Chapter 8). We will question the second distinction, by exploring whether the 'powerful opponents' that social movements engage with over a 'conflictual issue' are any longer best thought of as nation states and political institutions (by looking at globalization in Chapter 6). We will question the third distinction by asking whether globalization and the altered context of mobilization it presents (which includes a technological context dominated by new media), raises doubts about whether a shared 'collective identity' is a necessary, or even desirable, feature of social movements. Finally, we will question the fourth distinction by challenging the idea that social movements are characterized by the use of protest events, which have largely been thought of as public in nature (see Chapters 5, 7, and 8). Lifestyle movements involve people in forms of protest that are individualized and submerged in their everyday practices (see Chapter 5);

terrorist movements bring home the covert and hidden nature of social movements before explosive moments of protest occur (see Chapter 7); and looking at different forms of protest in non-conventional contexts suggests that protest in repressive regimes sometimes has to be hidden and silent (or even takes a 'virtual' form online) rather than noisy and public, and might in certain circumstances be all the more effective for it (see Chapter 8). While we challenge conceptualizations of social movements in the chapters to come, we will also, therefore, necessarily challenge conceptualizations of 'protest' as well.

Main arguments

What, then, will be the critical assessment of the field of social movement studies that is forwarded here? The main arguments of the book are twofold. First, it will be suggested that conceptualizations of social movements have – through critical reflection – been moving in a similar direction, referred to as a 'relational' understanding of what social movements are and how they operate. I will tease out the development of this relational understanding of social movements and defend the advantages it brings on a conceptual and methodological level. Secondly, it will be suggested that some of the most important conceptual work to be done in social movement studies involves deconstructing the distinction that is drawn between collective, organized efforts at social change, and individual, unorganized efforts at social change. I engage in this work later in the book by exploring the relationship between social movements and unorganized forms of protest which I call 'misbehaviour' (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999).

I will show therefore that the four conceptual distinctions that provide a common basis for understanding social movements today result from debate, and that debate is far from done. While we do not necessarily need to 'trade what we have so far produced for a few really good conceptual distinctions' as Goffman (1963, 261) puts it, we do, however, need to continue the work of critically engaging with the conceptual distinctions that we have already got. It is through complicating and challenging these distinctions that our understanding of 'what social movements are' and the dynamics that animate them will be generated. In the chapters that follow, therefore, I'll take care of the conceptual distinctions; you enjoy the cold beer.

Useful features

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There are number of features in the book to assist your critical engage-
ment with the perspectives covered. You will find in each chapter a 'case
point', a 'methods point', and a 'debate point', which offer a chance to
stop and reflect on the approach by engaging with an interesting case
study, a famous controversy, or the methodological implications of dif-
ferent conceptualizations. At the end of each chapter you will find a
summary of the key points about the approach we have discussed, and
the critical issues it raised. There are also questions posed in a 'discus-
sion point' at the end of each chapter, which can be used as a way to
think about the wider questions raised by the approach. Finally, there
are 'further reading' suggestions at the end of each chapter, which pro-
vide you with guidance on where to begin your wider reading.

2

From the mad to the sane:
collective behaviour and its critics

'But I don't want to go among mad people', Alice remarked.
'Oh, you can't help that', said the Cat. 'We're all mad here.
I'm mad. You're mad.'
'How do you know I'm mad?' said Alice.
'You must be,' said the Cat, 'or you wouldn't have come here.'

(Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*)

This chapter is concerned with 'collective behaviour' (CB), a subfield of American Sociology which claimed social movements and protest as its subject matter in the first half of the twentieth century and reflected, in particular, on the rise of anti-democratic movements like fascism. CB should not be thought of as one united approach, but instead a field of research interest that attracted sociologists of very different theoretical persuasions. The two sociologists that we will look at here are Herbert Blumer (a symbolic interactionist) and Neil Smelser (a structural functionalist). We will delve into what these theoretical labels mean in the course of the chapter, but only cursory sociological knowledge is needed to know that symbolic interactionism is heavily critical of structural functionalism (and vice versa), meaning that the leading figures of CB in no way propose *the same* approach to social movements and protest. Blumer and Smelser are united in their desire to understand 'collective behaviour', not in their perspective on it.

Having said this, the tendency of critics has been to lump together the different strands of CB in order to highlight the common thread in their thinking. CB theorists of whatever persuasion, argues Doug McAdam (1982), share the assumption that *social problems* are the root-cause of protest, that social problems ignite psychological grievances and strong emotions, and that these emotions push individuals over the edge and out on to the streets. This common thread leads to a conceptualization of CB as 'irrational group behaviour' caused by 'strains' in society, and the 'grievances' they create for people. Like a bottle of