# Social Movements and Futures Research

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**Abstract**
This article discusses sociological approaches to the study of social movements and assesses their relevance for futures research. Older theories of collective behavior viewed mass protest as result of structural strains or collapse of order. Revolutions were seen as an inevitable result of social disenfranchisement. More recent theories argued that deprivation exists often without the occurrence of any upheavals and stressed the importance of resource mobilization, political opportunities, collective identity, common goals, and transhistorical struggle for recognition. Although each of the different approaches has its problems, combined they are providing a valuable resource for a reconceptualization of futures research.

**Keywords**
social movements, social change, collective identity, political process, recognition

The aim of this article is to bring social movements research and futures studies into a dialogue. "Futures research and sociology have only rarely been interconnected," wrote Eleonora Barbieri Masini in a summary article for the *International Handbook of Sociology*.[1] Sociology can offer futures studies to overcome its technological bias, and a prospective orientation can help sociology to move from analyses of past and present to an analysis of available futures.[2]

Futures research is often depicting itself—frequently with some tone of urgency—as being addressed to "the decision makers." Yet, who are these decision makers? Who are the ones being thought of as making the crucial decisions shaping our future? Statesmen? Chief executive officers (CEOs)? Political and business elites? Religious and theological leaders? What about the impact of the grassroots on these decision-making processes? How do we identify the relevant actors? Futures research is far too quiet on the question of who the actors are that can implement the policy recommendations and act upon the scenarios we come up with in our research.

As all knowledge is always part of existing fields of power—whether one intends this or not—the question to whom research is being addressed is a relevant one. We already learned from the discussions on self-fulfilling and self-defeating predictions[3] that we need to include "feedback loops"[4] into our analysis.[5] The same holds true for the agentic capacities of different actors, capacities that vary from actor to actor.

This is why I think that we should—apart from much-needed normative theorizing and conventional scenario building studies—also address the question "Who shapes the future with what means, how and why?" Decision makers are often only thought of as political and business elites. True, these are most powerful actors. Yet nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and social movements may have impact, too. Social change happens not only

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through voluntary action of powerful individual leaders or blind structural macroshifts and through either ordinary "normal politics" or total "revolutionary rupture" but also through—and importantly—more intermediate processes, through a kind of third track, involving active sectors in civil society's public sphere, where ideas and agendas for imagination are born. And this is why I would like to see the fields of social movement research and futures studies enter in more exchange.

## The Question of Futures in Social Research

The roots of the relation between futures studies and sociology can be dated back to the time before sociology became a scientific discipline.[6] The future had played a central role in the thought of the Enlightenment, the utopian socialism, and the emerging and classical sociology. Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber all tried—each in his particular way—to identify transformational laws, mechanisms, and patterns that determine social change.

The quality of prognoses about future social transformations depends on the knowledge about the dynamics on which the nature of social change is based. Despite efforts of grand theorizing, sociology has not found any unified paradigm for the explanation of social development that would do justice to its complexity. Simple basis–superstructure models, according to which the material socioeconomic "basis" determines the cultural "superstructure,"[7] turned out to be deficient. This has already been stressed by Max Weber.[8] Yet still today, the bulk of current futures studies, most of them undertaken by think tanks or international organizations,[9] appears to focus so much on the economic and the technological potentials of future transformations that other social dimensions appear only as marginal or external conditions. However, cultural determinism is just as deficient as materialist determinism, as Weber already had pointed out, too.[10] It thus appears to be crucial to consider the interdependency between different spheres of social action, each of which has its own dynamics.

The initial determinism of the philosophy of history and the model of unilinear progress have lost over time their power to convince and give rise to new conceptualizations of social change. Hans-Peter Müller and Michael Schmid argue in their landmark work on social change that the "guiding idea of continuous and straight change" should be abandoned as a "little likely border-line case."[11] Piotr Sztompka distinguishes in his masterful survey on *The Sociology of Social Change* the following ideal-typical forms of social processes:

- unilinear processes: rising (progressive), declining (regressive)
- multilinear processes with alternative split-offs: rising (progressive), declining (regressive)
- nonlinear step functions with quantitative jumps
- cyclical processes: steady, accelerating, moderating
- spiral processes: rising (progressive), declining (regressive)[12]

Unilinear progress is in Sztompka's typology of social processes only one special case of a multiplicity of possible forms of change. Sztompka emphasizes throughout his study the crucial importance of historical contingency, "human agency," and "social movements as motors of social change."[13]

As expressed in an increasing range of diverse sociological theory types, the contemporary consciousness of time is characterized by a fundamental contingency that opens the horizon of the possible for social and political creation.[14]

The revolutions of 1989 and the termination of the Cold War led only very briefly to a climate in which the proclamation of "the end of history" became a possibility[15] until a new series of violent conflicts in nationalist, religious, and ethnic shape (such as in the Balkans and in Sub-Sahara Africa) brought the turbulent dynamics of history back onto the agenda of the present. The recent attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon catapulted conflict into the centers of the First World. Conflict disturbs the stories of unilinearity, predictability, or closure.

If human agency and the collective imaginary can push the course of future change into a direction not entirely out of reflective control, then the following question becomes relevant: what are the conditions under which different types of collective actors constitute themselves to influence the course of future development?

Although much futures research commissioned by think tanks, governments, and intergovernmental organizations seems to be addressed to political and economic elites, I would like to see more reflection on the role of civil society and the grassroots in the future-shaping processes. This is why I turn in the next section to a review of social movements research.

## Social Movement Theory

Wendell Bell, the author of the standard-setting and field-defining two volumes of the *Foundations of Futures Studies*,[16] began his career with research on movements. His early work dealt with the national independence movements of his day, especially those in the West.[17] Using the research toolkit available in the 1960s, his research was concerned with values, attitudes, and future-oriented beliefs, and achieved well-appraised insights.

Yet the study of social movement has undergone tremendous change since this time. Older theories and assumptions have lost their appeal. Three decades of research have let us to view the underlying image of society as masses ruled, if not managed, by leaders as being too inconsistent with empirical reality. It is thus worthwhile to look at the inventory of social movement scholarship, and to consider the conditions and reasons for the theoretical shifts.

The single most discussed treatment of movements at the turn of the 20th century was Gustave LeBon's study of crowd behavior, which highlighted the irrationality of mobilized masses.[18] Its influence reached to both the later sociological analysis and the emerging psychoanalysis. The rise of Hitler seemed to lend tragic credence to the tenets of crowd psychology and their warnings with regard to the manipulability of masses. The Fascist movements, especially the National Socialist movement, taught scholars to be wary of popular movements for their capacity to undermine and destroy democratic institutions and civil liberties, in effect giving rise to totalitarianism.[19]

It is hence not surprising that the scholarly discourse on collective behavior after World War II started by emphasizing the dangerousness of crowds. Neil Smelser attempted in the late 1950s and early 1960s structural functionalist explanations by viewing collective behavior largely as the result of "social strain."[20] A close examination of Smelser's ideas, however, shows that he did not regard strains as the only aspects determining collective behavior. He saw in his analysis of "norm-oriented movements" a whole set of factors at work, including "structural conduciveness," "generalized belief," "mobilization formation," and "response of agencies of social control," along with specific "precipitating factors."[21] The seeds for much of the later research were thus in place.

Since the late 1960s, scholarly treatments of collective behavior and social movements rapidly increased in the wake of a wave of mobilizations in many parts of the world. Today, the field is characterized not only by high-quality scholarship but also by a high degree of fragmentation. Despite cross-continental influence between these movements as well as between scholars on both sides of the Atlantic, two distinct approaches emerged and began to dominate the field: in shorthand called "political process" and "collective identity."

In the United States, Charles Tilly became the pioneer of the "resource mobilization" approach. In their numerous studies, Tilly, Doug McAdam, and Sydney Tarrow, among others, subsequently transformed this approach into what was to be called the "political process model."[22] Relational ties were seen as a resource for "organizational strength."[23] Cultural aspects were addressed mainly in terms of "cognitive liberation,"[24] "intervening variables,"[25] or purposive "framing."[26]

In Europe, Alain Touraine, Alessandro Pizzorno, and Alberto Melucci pioneered an approach that highlighted the novelties of "New Social Movements" and their social

self-constitution as collective actors. For example, the Touraine team's method consisted of "sociological intervention."[27] Its "main principles"[28] were as follows. It rejects surveys of isolated individuals in favor of concentrating on collective action.[29] This implied focusing on groups and on the openness of the given action situation. Through open dialogue, it sought to define the meaning that the actors themselves attribute to their actions. The researcher was neither a detached objective analyst nor a mere partisan. He or she was rather a participant observer therapist who, so the authors postulate, "must identify" himself or herself "with the highest possible meaning" of the movement's cause, which challenged the central core of society."[30] In this way, the researchers "help[ed] the militants to move toward self-analysis."[31] The test for all hypotheses developed was seen in their practical relevance.[32]

Whereas the political process approach focuses on political dynamics and the relations between state and movements, the collective identity approach is more concerned with culture, the social self-constitution of movements, and their ability to imagine and to invent alternative futures. The distinction between a political process and a collective identity approach is to be taken as an ideal-typical distinction and, in actual research practice, not always very clean-cut.[33] Nevertheless, this distinction has analytical value because it helps to identify underlying theoretical assumptions, strengths, and weaknesses. Calls for synthesis have often been made,[34] but the field is still so fragmented that the question was raised whether scholars engage in "paradigm warfare."[35]

To overcome this predicament, I have proposed a more synthetic model that draws on the insights of these different approaches, and operates with the three key concepts of opportunity structures, network capacities, and communicative praxes.[36] Such an approach solves the problem of "paradigm warfare" and avoids the extremes of an everything-is-possible voluntarism and of an overdeterministic structuralist view. It strikes a balance, and relates both structure and agency to one another. Structures provide the resources and limits for action, yet the leverage of actors depends on the actors' perceptions of and expectations about the world and its changeability.

Although the concept of opportunity structures and network capacities are more closely related to the political process perspective, the notion of nonstrategic, deliberative, and open communicative praxes draws more strongly on the European new social movement theory. New social movement theorists argued that the essence of contemporary social movements is not strategic struggle over the distribution of scarce resources but the communicative construction of collective identity.[37]

## History as Struggle for Recognition

In social movement studies, recognition theory has not received the attention it deserves as a means to put the dynamics of social movements into a systematic, historical, and also future-oriented perspective. The philosophy of recognition has its roots in the writings of the young Hegel during the first decade of the nineteenth century in Jena,[38] and has recently been revived and elaborated.[39] The central idea is that the process of history can be described as a continuous struggle for recognition.

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor argues that the "crucial feature of human life is its fundamentally *dialogical* character"[40]: "We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us."[41] Taylor points out that "the need, sometimes the demand, for *recognition*" is a driving force behind nationalism, feminism, and the multiculturalism of subaltern minorities. His thesis is that

> our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by misrecognition of others, and so a person or a group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.[42]

Coming out of the tradition of the Frankfurt School's critical theory, Axel Honneth aims at a normative social theory capable "to explain processes of social change through reference to the normative claims that are structurally based in the relation of mutual recognition."[43] Honneth elaborates Hegel's notion of a "struggle for recognition," and brings it together with George Herbert Mead's social-psychological insight that one's identity is formed in interaction with others and that it hence depends on the recognition by others. The need for recognition thus assumes the status of a universal anthropological fundamental that unfolds itself in the course of history. Three forms of recognition are distinguishable in modern society: love among family and friends, rights in the political sphere, and values in civil society. In negative terms then, the withholding of recognition leads to pain and suffering, and can thus provoke resistance.

From this perspective, the normative direction of social change comes from "morally motivated struggles of social groups, their collective efforts, to push for the cultural and institutional implementation of expanded forms of reciprocal recognition."[44] Honneth views history as "a process of moral development [moralischen Bildungsprozeß] in which the normative potential develops itself along a sequence of idealized struggles."[45] Honneth pointed to a tendency within the development of law toward increasing universality as one indication for the existence and efficacy of such a transhistorical struggle. In his discussion of the sociohistorical work of E. P. Thompson and Barrington Moore, Honneth argues that the "moral grammar of social struggle" is largely lost[46] because they don't pay enough attention to the "structural logic [Eigensinn] of relations of recognition,"[47] and can thus not bridge the gap between isolated phases of struggle and the underlying long-term development.[48]

According to Honneth, social movements arise under conditions of misrecognition, when actors are deprived of the recognition their identity depends on. His model of conflict based on misrecognition is not intended to replace the model of conflict based on interest but to "supplement" and "correct" it[49] to the extent that action-guiding collective interests are constituted in a "moral horizon of experience."[50]

What had become clear from the discussion of interests is that once common interests are realized, or created, they are a powerful, albeit not sufficient, force toward collective action. Yet from the perspective of recognition theory, the approach that uses the notion of interest has the shortcoming of being on the conceptual level left with nothing but strategic actors that struggle over scarce resources in a zero-sum game. Insofar as this struggle is strategic, the interacting parties treat each other merely as means to their ends. Communication is in this view essentially adversarial rather than based on an orientation at mutual understanding. It is thus not based on a mutual recognition of the partners to a speech act but is, in the terminology of Habermas, "parasitic" to the ideal speech act.[51]

The strength of the recognition approach is that it avoids the short-circuiting of communicative action to strategic behavior. Yet we again encounter a range of problems when trying to make the notion of recognition fruitful for explaining collective action. First, as Alexander and Lara[52] noted, Honneth's theory is not "textured" enough to make the transition from universal anthropological needs to actual resistance plausible. Another problem with Honneth's theory is the relationship between various levels of recognition. For example, neo-Nazi groups provide their members with the group's recognition, but obviously, what the group is struggling for would result in the violation of other groups' enjoyment of recognition. Individual neo-Nazis might in fact gain prestige within their group for violent acts against others. Recognition theory has so far not yet solved the problem of how to distinguish between "good" and "bad" recognition.[53]

Some of the problems pointed to when discussing interests reoccur when dealing with recognition. Why would individual actors pay individual prizes for engaging in recognition struggles when they might also get recognition as free riders without paying anything? What allows actors to find out actually whether and by what causes they are deprived of recognition?

I will not pursue the epistemological debate about the preconditions for identifying the

universal anthropological needs but move to the question, raised by Nancy Fraser's work, whether recognition and distribution need to be rigidly opposed.[54] Is a struggle for recognition not likely to be also a struggle for distribution? Oppressed identities are frequently deprived of a just share of resources. Thus, a case can be made to consider the pursuit of interests to be part of an expanded notion of identity and recognition.

The struggles for recognition and redistribution are increasingly global. Martin Albrow makes an important distinction between "world society" and "global society": whereas *world* society refers to the interdependence of action consequences, *global* society refers to action orientations, to a consciousness of being part of one global society.[55] Albrow sees the advent of "the global age" characterized by a global "reflexivity," which was not technically possible in previous eras that lacked the necessary means of communication.[56]

In his later writings, Jürgen Habermas envisioned a "postnational constellation," in which the UN Declaration of Human Rights is transformed into a set of rights enforceable through international courts of justice and in which a decisively strengthened United Nations Organization is not only able to reach valid decisions but also able to act and impose them.[57] To overcome the "age of sovereign single-states" (*Zeitalter souveräner Einzelstaaten*), it is, according to Habermas, necessary that democratic citizenship avoids the particularistic closure in favor of a "universal world citizenship," which he sees emerging with the political communications about the Vietnam and Golf Wars, and anticipated by Immanuel Kant's vision of a world public sphere in the context of the French Revolution.[58] Habermas's notion of *Verfassungspatriotismus* ("constitutional patriotism") tries to free democratic citizenship from the confines of national identity and anchor it instead in a common political culture that is socioculturally open to the plurality of lifeforms.[59]

Yet the growth of global (especially financial) markets has not yet encountered any political equivalent capable of regulation or control. World-systemic integration has proceeded at a much faster pace than global-societal integration.[60] To what extent world society becomes a global society depends in large part on the creative actions and the imagination not only of elites[61] but also of actors at the grassroots.[62] Social movement theory can help to better understand the critical grassroots dynamics of future making. The World Order Models Project[63] can gain renewed vitality by drawing on insights from the experiments with sociological intervention and the more detached analyses of political power processes.

## Conclusion

Connecting the scholarly fields of research on futures and social movements opens opportunities for tackling important empirical research tasks. Social movement research provides crucial analytical tools that can help to construct better theoretical models of possible and probable future social change, and empirically richer scenarios. It can also inform normative debates about desirable futures. Let me conclude my discussion by focusing on five areas in which the cooperation between social movement theory and futures research appears to be particularly needed.

1. Identify, describe, and explain *actors*. What groups are engaged in the struggle over the constitution of the future? How and under what conditions did these actors emerge? What keeps them together? What constitutes them? Knowing the relevant actors helps to improve models of social change.
2. Listen to what the movements say. What are their social *messages*? What are their diagnoses of the present, and what are their normative suggestions for the future? What are their complaints about specific sufferings and wrongs in society?[64] What practical innovations can be learned from them? What are their demands and proposals for change? What are their imaginary, new ideas, and how do they envision future goals and preferable changes?
3. Identify, describe, and explain *power* differentials between different types of actors, including elite movements and

movements of the weak and disenfranchised. This knowledge contributes to better models of social change. Social actors struggle on an uneven playing field, they command different kinds of resources, they have differential access to power, and their chances of forming alliances vary widely. Outcomes of contentious interaction can of course only be assessed in retrospect. Many goals advocated by movements are never realized, and mobilizations had often outcomes that are unintended. Whereas some movements disappear into oblivion, others succeed, and a few might even yield outcomes beyond their stated goals.

4. Identify, describe, and explain *mechanisms* of change. The struggle of the shaping of the future unfolds in multiple arenas, involving diverse set of rules. The task here is to study the ways in which particular changes are being brought about. The range of processes includes persuasion, force, moral outrage, propaganda, reasoning, imposition from above, and change from below. Inclusion of these mechanisms can help to construct better models of social change.

5. Identify, describe, and explain the *relationship between mechanisms* of change. The different mechanisms are analytical abstractions. Empirically, they are interlaced with one another. Different mechanisms are simultaneously at work, some usually more prominent than others at a given time. Comparative studies can provide insight into the relative weight of mechanisms. For example, comparisons of the "power of the word" versus the "power of the sword" can help specify under which conditions does the logic of better arguments matter more than brute force, and under which conditions may the opposite be true? Comparative studies can also help to assess how sustainable are the outcomes of the different mechanisms?

The playing field in which these different types of actors struggle over the shaping of the future is uneven. Their access to resources, ability to form network alliances, and creativity in communicative praxes varies. Yet as Karl Mannheim had once observed, it is small movements that bring about big future changes.[65] And this is why I would like to see future studies to make greater use of the rich toolbox of movements research. Against the claims of the "end of history," futures studies can help to carve out spaces for reflective decisions and expand the realm of the political.

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## Notes

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