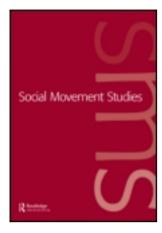
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Understanding Social Movements:
Theories from the Classical Era to
the Present; Theories of Political
Protest and Social Movements: A
Multidisciplinary Introduction, Critique,
and Synthesis; Social Movements: The
Key Concepts

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BOOK REVIEW

Understanding Social Movements: Theories from the Classical Era to the Present Steven M. Buechler

Boulder, CO, Paradigm, 2011, x + 259 pp., index, \$89.25, ISBN 978-1-59451-915-4 (hardback), \$30.56, ISBN 978-1-59451-916-1 (paperback)

Theories of Political Protest and Social Movements: A Multidisciplinary Introduction, Critique, and Synthesis

Karl-Dieter Opp

New York, NY, Routledge, 2009, xvi + 403 pp., index, \$169.00, ISBN 978-0-415-48388-9 (hardback), \$62.95, ISBN 978-0-415-48389-6 (paperback)

Social Movements: The Key Concepts

Graeme Chesters & Ian Welsh

New York, NY, Routledge, 2011, x + 192 pp., index, \$120.00, ISBN 978-0-415-43114-9 (hardback), \$31.95, ISBN 978-0-415-43115-6 (paperback)

The scholarly literature on social movements is dominated by monographs and journal articles. Surprisingly, few book-length survey works are to be found. The three books under review here present, summarize, critique, and synthesize the major concepts and theories that are used in the study of social movements. Taken together, they provide scholars and students alike with a detailed roadmap of the field; individually, they succeed to a greater or lesser degree.

Buechler's well-written *Understanding Social Movements*, a self-described 'chronological survey' and 'sociological history' (p. 1), does an excellent job of laying out the major routes. It is also the most sociological of the three books. Each of the 13 chapters opens with a section called 'The Context,' which provides the structural and cultural backdrop against which each theory emerged. Buechler explains: 'Just as social movements have been shaped by larger sociohistorical forces, the study of social movements has been influenced by historical, intellectual, and organizational factors' (p. 2).

Part I, 'Classical Approaches,' includes three chapters that cover Marx and Lenin, Weber and Michels, and Durkheim and Le Bon, respectively. Each chapter introduces the theorists' major contributions and connects them to the study of social movements. Buechler successfully demonstrates each thinker's legacy at the end of each chapter. Turning to 'Traditional Theories' in Part II, Buechler moves smoothly from Europe before 1920 to Chicago after 1920. His discussion of Le Bon's influence on Park, Burgess, and Blumer is particularly enlightening. Just as thought-provoking is his assertion that a

second Chicago School, led by Turner and Killian, emerged in the 1950s and represented both a continuation and a modification of the work on collective behavior that had been undertaken by the first Chicago School. The remaining two chapters in Part II present political sociology and political movements, as well as strain and deprivation models, as emphasized in the works of Lipset and Smelser, respectively.

Part III, 'Paradigm Shifts,' is the longest section. Focusing on the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, its four chapters cover resource mobilization approaches, political process theory, framing and social construction, and new social movement theories. Readers will appreciate Buechler's clear and comprehensive summary of each of these theories as well as his description of how each has been 'elaborated' and 'embellished.' I found particularly useful the author's explanation of new social movement theory as 'a congeries of interrelated ideas and arguments ... with many variations on a general approach to the topic,' and his presentation of eight themes that feature prominently in the various strands of new social movement theory (pp. 159–162).

Across the three chapters in Part IV, 'Recent Trends,' Buechler's theme is the ongoing rift between structural and cultural approaches to the study of social movements. He is careful, almost tentative, driving the reader through these parts; this is clear from the title of the first chapter of this final section, which is phrased as a question ('Alternatives, Critiques, and Synthesis?'). The author's goals here are to review 'alternative strands of work,' identify the most important critiques of the major theoretical schools, and outline 'an attempted synthesis of perspectives, noting the emergent difficulties and subsequent criticisms of doing so' (p. 177). Buechler does not attempt to develop new theory, nor does he go very far in terms of synthesizing existing theories. He safely concludes that the 'conceptual "pushes" and empirical "pulls" should continue enriching social movement theory into the foreseeable future' (p. 227).

Like Buechler's book, the 12 chapters in Opp's book drive readers down the major routes on the map of social movement studies; unlike Buechler, Opp also takes detours onto the scenic byways and largely unknown backroads of movement theory. As mentioned above, Buechler devotes the majority of his book to a chronology of major movement theories, saving a treatment of recent trends, alternative theoretical 'threads,' and new directions for the last part of the book. Opp takes a somewhat different approach, emphasizing theory development, what can be learned from each approach, and a grand synthesis he calls the 'structural-cognitive' model. Denser, more ambitious and purely theoretical, and rather less clearly written than Buechler's *Understanding Social Movements*, Opp's *Theories of Political Protest and Social Movements* is much less a sociological history of movement theory development than a critique, application, and attempted synthesis of a variety of theoretical approaches.

To be sure, Opp devotes separate chapters to collective action, resource mobilization, political opportunity, and framing. His objective, however, is not simply summarizing and critiquing the major theoretical approaches. He is significantly more inclined than Buechler toward original theorizing. Chapter 1, 'What kind of theory do we need and what is a good theory?', provides explicit and useful conceptual guidelines for critiquing social movement theories. Chapter 2 represents a logical follow-up, inquiring into the difference between a 'protest' and a 'social movement' as well as providing clarifications of other such basic concepts. Opp's Chapters 3 through 8 and 10 'focus on the extant theoretical perspectives' (p. xv), basically mirroring Buechler's coverage of the major approaches utilized by social movement scholars between the 1960s and the mid-2000s.

It is Chapters 9 and 11 that make Opp's book unique, as they present, respectively, the fullest discussions of the author's own hypotheses and an attempted synthesis. Chapter 9 applies Austrian psychologist Fritz Heider's balance theory – which, to oversimplify, focuses on 'cognitive structures that consist of cognitive elements' (p. 275) – to identity and framing processes in order to generate 12 propositions about the relationship between individuals' and movement organizations' 'cognitive structures.' The larger goal of this chapter is to address the 'dearth of clear and informative hypotheses about the origin and effects of collective identities and framing processes' (p. 275) by 'propos[ing] informative hypotheses, based on a general theory, that can be tested' (p. 303).

Opp accomplishes this goal – that is, he proposes 12 original hypotheses – but this reader was left to wonder whether doing so was worthwhile, other than as an interesting exercise in theory. Consider his first hypothesis:

If individuals strongly identify with a social movement organization and have not yet developed attitudes toward some of the movement's ideas or toward a whole movement ideology (or, equivalently, toward a frame), it is likely that a positive attitude toward these ideas or toward the ideology will emerge. (p. 283)

It is difficult to see the ways in which this hypothesis offers a new, or even testable, idea. It seems simply to state a well-known phenomenon, as do several other of his propositions. Still other hypotheses are presented in such mechanical language that it was difficult to remember while reading them that collective action is undertaken by the actual people. One is tempted to 'translate' them into plain language; the irony is that Opp himself goes on to present Hypothesis 1 'in the jargon of the social movement literature' – as if the language of the hypothesis needed to be any more elaborate. In fact, one senses a certain defensiveness in the author at the end of this chapter. 'We anticipate,' Opp writes, 'that proponents of the framing approach will be skeptical about the fruitfulness of BT [balance theory], for whatever reasons. If that is the case we would like to ask the major proponents of the approach to derive the previous propositions or, perhaps, improved alternatives, from their approach' (p. 303).

Opp presents a much more ambitious – and, to this reviewer, ultimately unsuccessful – project in Chapter 11: synthesizing no fewer than five major theoretical perspectives (collective action, resource mobilization, political opportunity, identity, and framing) by using what the author calls the 'structural-cognitive model' (SCM). The basic idea behind the model is to connect the 'micro' and 'macro' levels of analysis, which Opp contends has hardly been done. His model is summarized in complicated flowcharts on page 328, which include unexplained 'other factors' imposing themselves from outside the model. Opp attempts to demonstrate the utility of the model by applying it to four protest events: the anti-globalization movement, Brazil's movement of landless rural workers, the American civil rights movement, and the East German revolution. He offers no explanation for his choice of these four seemingly disparate events.

Although a full critique of Opp's SCM is beyond the scope of a book review, it is necessary to point out here that at least two potential problems immediately present themselves: (1) Most of the chapter's discussion of applying the SCM is based on rational choice theory and (2) the SCM appears to unduly emphasize cognitive processes as well as structural constraints and opportunities to the neglect of cultural variables. Opp offers just two sentences of justification for the first shortcoming: '... in regard to looking at

changing cognitive structures balance theory could be applied, as chapter 9 has shown. In explaining changing attitudes toward a regime or its policies the Fishbein-Ajzen theory could be applied' (p. 349). He dismisses the second in this way: 'How are emotions and culture related to the structural-cognitive model? A detailed answer would require another chapter' (p. 358). That sort of sidestepping is a disappointingly common aspect of the book. In fact, Opp offers the following as the book's last three sentences, as a justification for not including a discussion of other theoretical perspectives: 'We will not discuss such perspectives. This should not be understood as any judgment about their fruitfulness. The reason for omitting them is simply that this book is already long enough, so that it did not seem useful to include other additional material' (p. 362).

If Buechler's and Opp's survey works take us down the major interstates and neglected backroads on the map of social movement studies, Chesters and Welsh's book points out the major signposts along the routes. It opens with a 20-page introduction to the concept of 'social movement' which is a condensed discussion and critique primarily of three of the theoretical approaches that are also covered by both Buechler and Opp: collective behavior, resource mobilization, and new social movement theories. The bulk of the book, as its subtitle The Key Concepts implies, is essentially a dictionary of 80 keywords. Varying in length from a few paragraphs to several pages, each entry ends with a list of references and resources for readers who wish to learn more.

While the authors included entries for most of the major theories, concepts, and types of movement, readers can reasonably question others. For example, at least a half-dozen concepts appear to have been included in the book simply because they are connected to what the authors refer to as 'network movements.' Viewing network movements as having essentially replaced both old and new social movements, Chesters and Welsh define them both as 'movements that are partially, or completely catalyzed by the availability of CMC [computer mediated communication] and which are often concerned with the use and appropriation of that information architecture' and as 'the entirety of the social and communicative networks that constitute a social movement' (p. 120). Although the concept of a network movement makes intuitive sense–indeed, it is surely a minuscule proportion of today's movements that would *fail to qualify* as 'network movements' – the authors do an incomplete job of drawing out its implications for social movement studies. Despite this, Chesters and Walsh devote entries to a variety of concepts and organizations connected to them, such as *capacity building, computer-mediated communication, disobbediente, Earth First!, emergence, Peoples' Global Action,* and *Reclaim The Streets*.

A related concern is that many of the 'key concepts' are either so obscure or so general as to raise questions about their appropriateness for a book that seeks 'to present both an accurate reflection of the field and a description of the concepts that we believe are most conducive to intellectual and material mobilization' (p. 21, emphasis in original). Examples of obscure entries include some of the network movement-related terms above as well as ATTAC (Association for the Taxation of financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens), ecology of mind and ecology of action, Greenham Women, and Situationist International. At the other end of the spectrum are concepts like autonomy, culture, emergence, moral action, multitude, power, and precarity, which are so general that perhaps they should not have been given entries in a book of key concepts specifically in social movement studies.

And that raises perhaps the most difficult question faced by an author who wishes to write a book-length survey of the field of social movements: Which theories, concepts,

movements, and organizations should be included, and which should not? Each of the three books under review here undoubtedly excluded material that could be considered important. However, they differed in the quality and appropriateness of what they included. Opp's book is best utilized by scholars and graduate students. Chesters and Welsh's book can be fruitfully used as a refresher by scholars and students alike. Buechler's book is the most informative, straightforwardly written, comprehensive, and sociologically insightful of the three and, thus, also the most intellectually and practically palatable. For these reasons, it is also the only one of the three that I will adopt in my undergraduate Social Movements course.

Michael DeCesare is chair of the Department of Sociology at Merrimack College. His books include *New Directions in Sociology: Essays on Theory and Methodology in the 21st Century* (with Ieva Zake) and *A Discipline Divided: Sociology in American High Schools*. His articles have appeared in a variety of scholarly journals.

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