

## Old to New Social Movements: Capitalism, Culture and the Reinvention of Everyday Life

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### In this lecture....

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## Marxism and the Labour Movement

- European social movement theory evolved through critical engagement with Marxism and the fortunes of the labour movement
- So what kind of theory of social movements does Marxism offer?
- Ironically, Marxism 'does not contain a theory that specifically explains the emergence, character and development of social movements' (Nilsen 2009,109)
- Why? 'Because it is in itself a theory of social movements' (Nilsen and Cox, 2007,1).
- i.e. Marxism grew out of, and was designed to shape, a social movement itself – the labour movement (or the 'working class movement').
- In fact, Marxists see the labour movement as the one true social movement of capitalist societies.

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## New Social Movements (NSMs)

- 1970s and 1980s – labour movement in decline, working class identity eroding – is it the ‘end of social movements’???
- No! Argued the NSM theorists. Instead, a range of ‘new’ social movements emerged at this time to take place of labour movement:
  - Movements around peace and nuclear energy, Environmental movements, health-related movements, Autonomy movements (anti-psychiatry, school reform movements, self-help groups, youth movements), Movements around feminism and sexuality (Women’s and Gay Liberation)
- These ‘new’ social movements are **no longer rooted in class** (i.e. they are ‘post-material’).
- Class identities no longer able to give rise to politically significant collective identities and social movements (they are ‘old’).

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## What is ‘new’ about NSMs?

- i. A ‘new politics’ – to defend identities or to gain recognition for new personal and collective identities. To challenge dominant definitions of who we are and how we should live (rather than labour and citizenship issues).
- ii. A new site of struggle – protest = ‘counter-cultural’ activities. Creation of ‘autonomous spaces’ in everyday life in which people can experiment with new cultural values, new ways of relating to each other, new ‘selves’, outside of control by state and market. Less focused on confrontation with the state. Political struggle takes place within people’s personal lives and relationships.
- iii. A new composition – not working class, but cut across classes (if anything middle class radicals are over-represented in the NSMs). Involve women, young people, students not traditionally seen in labour movement.
- iv. A new organizational form – shift away from SMOs and big bureaucratic institutions (like unions, political parties) towards a network structure. Often rooted in informal (‘submerged’) networks of everyday life, like kinship and friendship. Concern for participation, internal democracy, decentralised power structures.

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## Where did NSMs come from?

- European scholars (Touraine, Melucci, Habermas) adopted Marx’s form of explanation but rejected the content of his theory as outdated.
- Society had moved on to a ‘post-industrial’ phase (Touraine 1974), with a ‘new’ key conflict, and a ‘new’ historical agent of change.
- The key conflict of post-industrial society does not surround the workplace and production, but culture, and the dominance that is exerted by state and market over cultural meanings, values, and even our sense of ‘self’
- And the new ‘historical agents of change’ are the NSMs (not workers).

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## Jürgen Habermas: the Colonization of the Lifeworld

- New conflicts surround the growth of the state (bureaucracy, law) and market (commodification) in advanced capitalist societies
  - State and market expand into the 'lifeworld', i.e. the world of everyday life - shared cultural meanings, personal relationships, personal identities.
  - This happens through growth of welfare state, privatisation, commercialisation (e.g. of education, health, culture)
- Habermas calls this process 'the colonization of the lifeworld by the system'. It creates conflicts not around labour, but around culture

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## Jürgen Habermas: the Colonization of the Lifeworld

- Our world of everyday life is under attack – becoming increasingly bureaucratized and commercialised and stripped of meaning
- 'Cultural impoverishment' and a 'loss of freedom' is the result
- NSMs seek to defend the lifeworld from this attack – to protect existing identities and ways of life, or to construct new ones away from system control

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## Alain Touraine and Alberto Melucci: Rebel Subjects in Information Society

- Melucci had been Touraine's student. They both refer to post-industrial society as 'Information Society' – a society where wealth depends upon circulating, utilising and controlling information rather than manufacturing goods.
- E.g. the new knowledge-based economy, ICT, financial markets, mass media & culture industries, branding and consumer culture

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## Implications of NSM theory

- Political protest can take different forms:
  - not just SMOs targeting the state with their demands through public demonstrations, but constructions of alternative cultural meanings, values, ways of living, in people's 'private' lives
- Political protest can also be about constructing your own sense of 'self' that escapes the pressures to conform to dominant cultural codes
- People can therefore be involved in a 'social movement' outside of SMOs:
  - they don't have to join an organization, but can live their lives, and think of themselves, differently
  - They imagine that their individual action is part of a wider collective effort (i.e. they share a collective identity, e.g. as vegetarians, as 'voluntary simplifiers', as 'straight edgers')
- Lifestyle and identity projects can be a form of political protest

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## Criticisms

- There are problems with the NSM argument, however:
  - i. NSMs are not totally 'new' - Feminism had material as well as post-material concerns, and targeted state with demands.
  - ii. Plus, labour movement had (and has) some 'new' characteristics - about identity, lifestyle, recognition and not just wages (Calhoun, Tucker, Edwards).
  - iii. What was seen as 'new' about NSMs didn't really last – informal network structures eventually gave way to bureaucratic institutions, e.g. Environmental movement
- So trying to explain movements by relating them to particular periods in history is problematic, suggesting shift from 'old' to 'new' is exaggerated
- Has there been a fundamental break in the nature of society and its key conflicts? Or are NSMs part of a 'cycle of protest'? (class conflicts will come back around?).

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