

Social Movement: Social Framework and Political Influence

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Abstract:

This article explores the dynamic relationship between social movements and political opportunity structures, highlighting how these movements both shape and are shaped by their socio-political environment. The discussion focuses on four key categories of political opportunities: access to political systems, instability of political elites, elite divisions, and cultural dimensions such as legitimacy and public discourse. It examines how social movements leverage these opportunities to influence policy and expand political access for marginalized groups. Additionally, the article analyzes political opportunities as both independent and dependent variables. While opportunities can foster the emergence and development of social movements, these movements also reshape the political landscape by creating new opportunities for themselves, other groups, and even opposing forces. Using examples such as the feminist movement in Algeria and the civil rights movement in the United States, the study demonstrates how collective action alters political frameworks. Finally, the article emphasizes the importance of integrating subjective perceptions and objective structures in understanding mobilization dynamics. By balancing structural analysis with strategic agency, the article provides a comprehensive perspective on the interplay between social movements and political opportunities.

Keywords: Social Movements, Political Opportunity, Collective Action, Social Mobilization, Political Influence.

Introduction

Social movements are considered a logical response to new situations that arise within society, serving as opportunities for transformation. Rather than being viewed as sources of disruption, they are seen as integral components of the political process and the political system itself. Social movements represent an optimal mechanism for mobilizing and utilizing resources to facilitate societal transformations, acting both as tools and active agents of change.

What qualifies as a social movement? A social movement can be defined as a sustained campaign of claim-making, employing repeated actions to advocate for a cause. These movements are supported by organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain their activities. However, it is important to note that not all forms of contentious politics qualify as social movements.

On one hand, social movements can be seen as rational attempts by excluded groups to mobilize sufficient political leverage to advance collective interests through noninstitutionalized means. As McAdam social movements are “collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based, in the group, organization, society, culture, or world order of which they are a part” (McAdam, 1982). Similarly, Snow, Soule, and Kriesi emphasize the dynamic and organized nature of these movements (Snow DA, 2004).

For this reason, it is essential to understand the relationship between social movements and social structure, as social movements are inherently part of the latter. The importance of this relationship can be summarized as follows:

- **Understanding Society:** Social structure provides insights into how societies are organized, including the roles and relationships between individuals, groups, and institutions. This understanding helps us comprehend the complexities of social life.
- **Identifying Inequalities:** Examining social structures reveals patterns of inequality related to class, race, gender, and other factors. This knowledge is crucial for addressing social justice issues and promoting equity.

- **Influencing Policy:** Understanding social structures can inform policymakers about the needs and challenges of different communities. This awareness can lead to more effective and targeted social policies.
- **Enhancing Critical Thinking:** Studying social structures encourages critical thinking about the norms, values, and institutions that shape human behavior. It fosters a questioning attitude toward societal norms and practices.

This overlap between social structure and political structure—where one is merely a reflection of the other—highlights their interconnectedness. The linking point between the two lies in the formation of social movements, which serve as a bridge between these domains.

Thus, to what extent does social structure and its readiness contribute to the formation of social movements? And how does the political system leverage social movements to its advantage?

Resource Mobilization Structures:

The "Resource Mobilization Theory" provides a perspective on social movements as rational collective decision-makers that mobilize their supporters and promote their causes using the best available strategies within the constraints of limited material and cognitive resources. Accordingly, mobilization structures can be defined as "the collective means, both formal and informal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action (McADAM, 1996).

The resource mobilization approach, represented by McCarthy and Zald, focused on the formal organizational structures of movements. This focus led to the development of concepts such as Social Movement Organization (SMO) or Social Movement Sector (SMS). By distinguishing itself from the equivalence established by Resource Mobilization Theory between social movements and formal organizations, the Political Process Model, represented by authors like Tilly, McAdam, or Morris, emphasized the critical importance of everyday spaces (grassroots preparations, in Tilly's terms)—such as workplaces or neighborhoods—in facilitating the structuring of collective action.

These informal structures of daily life, which McAdam referred to as "micromobilization contexts," play a fundamental role in the emergence phase of social movements. For example, Morris and McAdam demonstrated the role of local, core institutions such as associations or universities in the emergence of the civil rights movement.

Resource mobilization structures refer to the collective means, both formal and informal, through which individuals and groups mobilize resources and engage in collective action. These structures are critical in the organization and sustenance of social movements, as they provide the mechanisms for gathering support, coordinating efforts, and deploying resources effectively.

They can be categorized into:

1. **Formal Structures:** These include established organizations such as Social Movement Organizations (SMOs), unions, advocacy groups, and non-governmental organizations that provide a formal framework for mobilization.
2. **Informal Structures:** These consist of grassroots networks, community ties, and everyday spaces like workplaces, neighborhoods, or local associations that facilitate the spontaneous organization of collective action.

Both types of structures work in tandem to ensure the success and resilience of social movements, particularly in the face of limited resources and external constraints.

However, a social movement is not confined to a single organization. It consists of various resource mobilization structures, making it intriguing to study their composition, as well as the impact of these structures on the movement as a whole or on the development and organization of a specific social movement.

In this context, it is worth noting the concept of "radical flank effects." According to Haines, the presence of a radical flank is generally beneficial to the more moderate organizations within a social movement. The existence of an extreme wing can provide moderates with additional bargaining power when dealing with the political system or even push them to adopt more radical positions while still retaining state support.

The Mechanism of Multiple Uses of Mobilization Structures:

The concept of political mobilization structure has been the subject of two types of uses: one historical and the other comparative. Initially, it was theorized from a contradictory perspective by American researchers in political processes (McAdam, Tarrow, Tilly), who argue that the outbreak and fate of social movements largely depend on the opportunities provided by the changing institutional structure

and the ideological beliefs of social actors and authorities in a particular political system. This work inspired many researchers such as Kriesi, Kitschelt, Koopmans, and Duyvendak to develop a theory about political opportunity structures with the aim of conducting comparative studies of social movements. As a result, they developed a more stable approach, comparing political opportunity structures across a range of countries (McADAM, 1996).

These two approaches, in fact, present two distinct research perspectives. The American research trends interpret the emergence of a social movement through changes in the institutional structure or the informal power relations of a specific political system. This leads to the historical study of protest cycles related to a particular movement, such as the 2019 Algerian protest movements. On the other hand, the European approach focuses on considering the differences in the structure, development, and impact of similar movements in different countries, such as the 2011 Arab Spring protests, based on differences in the political characteristics of the states where these movements occur.

This difference in research perspectives leads to variations in the dimensions of political opportunities that will be at the heart of the analysis. The comparative perspective emphasizes the more structural aspects of political opportunities, while the historical perspective focuses on more fluctuating dimensions. In this regard, Tarrow distinguishes between short-term and long-term changes in opportunities. These two distinct research questions also lead to a different causal framework for political opportunity structures: proponents of the comparative perspective view the emergence and impact of movements over time as an independent variable, used to describe the dynamic aspects of the political environment that allow or encourage the emergence of challengers. On the other hand, the perspective focused on comparing the development of similar movements in different countries treats this concept as a dependent variable, or an external factor (GAMSON, 1996).

Tarrow (S. Tarrow) argues that, in reality, there is a convergence between dynamic and comparative viewpoints. While he acknowledges the importance of international comparisons in the Tarrow legacy, he warns against the dangers of comparing countries or systems that are static in nature. From a synchronicity perspective, researchers may be forced to compare social movements in two countries at different stages of their protest cycles, which could distort the picture we give of them. In order for such comparisons to be valid, they must relate to complete protest cycles, which suggests the need to rely on both dynamic and comparative approaches simultaneously (TARROW, 1996).

We can also distinguish between a conceptual view of political opportunity structures at the state level and a more focused view on a specific area of public policy. From this perspective, it seems that Tarrow adheres to the state-level concept. This was also the concept defended by Kitschelt, who provided the following justification for his position:

"While political opportunity structures vary across policy arenas within the same political system, the political characteristics at the system level and the 'national political styles' also play a key role in determining the dynamics of social movements. The nature of these characteristics and styles is crucial because representatives of entirely new demands often cannot effectively participate in highly specialized policy fields. Instead, they must turn to institutions and actors, such as parties, parliaments, and courts, which have the authority and decision-making power that partially, at least, transcend those of specific policy areas." (KITSCHELT, 1986)

However, it is important to focus on the lack of strategic differentiation in social movements. The question of whether opportunities, in their overall sense, fall within the realm of public policy remains an open research question for empirical investigation. It also raises the theoretical issue of the validity of generalizations in the field of policy—specifically in regard to particular public policies—which has become especially pertinent based on the idea of the ideal or exceptional nature of family policies (COMMAILLE, 1994).

Recent developments in collective action theory make it difficult to identify generalizations regarding the relative openness or closure of the political system as a whole. They call for careful attention in handling such issues. In addition to sectoral changes, it is essential to differentiate between the potential structural characteristics of the political system and the cyclical changes it may undergo. Therefore, ideally, once we formulate a hypothesis regarding the structural nature of the feature of interest, through comparing societies, it is necessary to conduct two tests to validate this hypothesis: on the one hand, comparing different areas of public life, including political ones, to rule out the possibility of regional or sectoral characteristics, and on the other hand, studying the process to determine cyclical changes from more stable characteristics (DURAN, 1999).

Social Movements: Catalyst for Change or Outcome of Change?

Through observing collective action within society and the reciprocal relationships between the political and social spheres, we are led to the question of which one influences the other, who is the source of change? Therefore, we are discussing the political opportunities generated by the pressure of social movements, and, on the other hand, the political exploitation of these movements. Thus, we are confronted with a dialectic.

Through a comprehensive view of the models of political opportunity structures, McAdam points out that most authors distinguish between the formal institutional structure and the informal power relations that characterize the system at a given time. What are the political opportunities produced through the convergence of different strands of social movements? Here, we will take Tarrow's classification as a starting point, who distinguishes between four main types of opportunities:

Access to the Political System: Does the existence of traditional opportunities for engagement encourage non-traditional protest participation, or on the contrary, is it based on loyalty and consensus? According to Eisinger (P.K.), the relationship between protest and political opportunity is oscillatory; neither complete access nor its absence encourages further protest. Competition is more likely to occur in systems characterized by a mix of conflicting perspectives between openness and closure. This theory is well illustrated by the case of democratic transitions in post-Soviet Eastern Europe. (KRIESI, 1989)

Political Instability: This instability is primarily measured in democracies through electoral instability, which makes alliances possible and calls on protesters to influence party margins. On the contrary, this encourages elites to seek support from the margins. However, political alliance instability does not necessarily imply electoral instability. Thus, the instability of elites and their internal conflicts may push them to seek support from marginalized groups.

Elite Divisions Conflicts between elites not only encourage protesters to engage in collective action but also ensure that a portion of the elite seeks to adopt the role of a people's platform in order to increase its political influence. These four main categories exist in most types of political opportunities. We will now mention some other dimensions that appear to be noteworthy.

The discussion of the prevailing strategies followed by political authorities in dealing with social movements is important because it allows for the observation of the potential divergent strategies of political authorities in the face of different social movements (as Tarrow suggested). It also highlights their role as arbiters of the political legitimacy of this or that movement. A clear example of this is the ongoing conflict between the feminist movement and the traditional family movement, which still shapes many Arab societies, with variations regarding the laws related to these issues and how these challenges are addressed.

Some researchers argue that there are factors within the political opportunity structure that are not directly related to the political system, but are connected to a broader cultural dimension. Here, Gamson and Meyer distinguish between two dimensions of opportunities: the institutional dimension and the cultural dimension, which includes elements such as legitimacy, class consciousness, "climate" or "mentalities," "development," public discourse, and the media (بورتا، 2017).

There is also significant importance placed on this cultural dimension, with "the structure of regional divisions" being seen as the most stable element within the political opportunity structure. This refers to the political divisions specific to each country, which depend on the social and cultural divisions of that country. This concept is primarily used to explain the strong spread of factional division to some extent, as it influences collective action, and its effect is not limited to creating patterns of dependence between social groups, thereby making conflicting interests possible (especially since it prevents other divisions from emerging to the forefront, which represent the specificity of "new social movements"). Including the cultural dimension in the political opportunity structure, although consistent with the latest developments in public policy analysis that emphasize the cognitive dimension of the latter, does not enjoy consensus. Therefore, sticking to a restricted and limited political definition of opportunities is necessary to avoid diluting the concept, which ultimately risks defining the entire environment of the social movement, thus losing its explanatory power by including too many factors (McADAM, 1996). Here, it is essential to include cultural, symbolic, or cognitive dimensions in the definition of political opportunities. In fact, the correct and strong political character of this dimension has been sufficiently clarified. However, it seems equally important not to conceive of this cultural dimension in a one-dimensional way, simply as an opportunity: if it is an opportunity that can be seized, it is also

an obstacle, and a problem. It is the framework that limits strategic action by setting boundaries on what can be politically considered.

This is essential to provide a final clarification regarding the concept of political opportunity structure: this concerns the debate over the objective or subjective nature of this concept. The various models that use the concept of political opportunity structure have not always provided clear data regarding the objective or subjective status of this structure. In fact, if the term "structure" refers to the idea of forces operating independently of will, the defining element in most of these theories is the actors' perception of the political opportunity structure, which influences the development of mobilization. This perception, as expressed by Nasser Jabi, is summarized by the following: "The conclusion reached by these younger generations, who constitute the majority of society, is that all the transformations that Algeria underwent after independence, which benefited some and not others, are seen as lacking legitimacy, particularly by the children of the working classes. This has placed them in an opposition not only to the political institutions but also to the generations, symbols, and elites." (Jabi, 2004)

Political Opportunities: Subjective Initiative and Available Existence:

The concept of political opportunity structure is related to the debate about its objective or subjective nature. Different models using the concept of political opportunity structure have not always provided clear data regarding its objective or subjective status. In fact, if the term "structure" refers to the idea of forces operating independently of will, the determining factor in most of these theories is the actors' perception of the political opportunity structure, which affects the development of mobilization. As Nasser Jabi expresses this perception: "The conclusion reached by these younger generations, who make up the majority of society, is that all these transformations that Algeria experienced after independence, which led to the benefit of some and not others, were seen as lacking legitimacy, especially by the sons of the popular classes. This put them in opposition, not only to political institutions, but also to the generations, symbols, and elites." (GAMSON, 1996)

Empirical applications of political opportunity theory have generally suffered from a tendency toward structural reductionism. While resource mobilization theory relies on a cost-benefit analysis at the micro level, which often does not adequately consider context, political opportunity structure theories often show a reverse overgeneralization by directly linking abstract characteristics of political systems to social movement mobilization, without specifying how contextual variables intervene in the strategic decisions of individual participants and organizers. To re-establish the relationship between structure and action, Koopmans introduced the concept of tangible opportunities, consisting of four elements: chances of success, reform/threat, facilitation, and repression. These are relevant as criteria for individual action and are directly related to the structural characteristics of the political context in which collective action takes place.

Empirical applications of political opportunity theory have generally suffered from a tendency toward structural reductionism. While resource mobilization theory relies on a cost-benefit analysis at the micro level, often neglecting sufficient context, political opportunity structure theories have often overgeneralized by directly linking abstract characteristics of political systems to social movement mobilization, without specifying how these contextual variables intervene in the strategic decisions of individual participants and organizers. To re-establish the relationship between structure and action, Koopmans introduced the concept of tangible opportunities, consisting of four elements: chances of success, reform/threat, facilitation, and repression, which are both relevant as criteria for individual action and directly connected to the structural characteristics of the political context of collective action.

The usual use of overly objective concepts in political opportunity structure theory has faced much criticism, especially in separating available structure and action. According to Koopmans, from this perspective, we must understand attempts to link political opportunity theory with framing theory. Opportunities only affect mobilization if they are seized by the actors involved. This cognitive understanding itself involves the "framing" of opportunities (GAMSON, 1996). McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly go in the same direction when they assert that an opportunity will only stimulate mobilization to the extent that it is visible and perceived as such. Therefore, instead of discussing opportunities and threats as objective structural factors, we must consider them as assignable.

These recent developments tend to condemn the lack of identification of the cognitive mechanisms through which opportunities are perceived, which in turn leads to mobilization. This approach is

consistent with the question centered around the issue of mobilization. This focus on the subjective dimension is rightly emphasized by François Chazel when he discusses the political opportunity structure. The emphasis on the subjective dimension can be explained by the fact that these authors seek primarily to explain mobilization itself, not its impact. A more focused investigation on the impact could lead to understanding the political opportunity structure in its objective dimension. Before focusing on framing processes, we will discuss two recent research directions in the field of political opportunity study that seem particularly fruitful to us: international context analysis of opportunities and treating political opportunity structure as a dependent variable (CHAZEL, 1992).

Political Opportunities as a Dependent Variable:

Let's take an example from our research: when the women's movement, as in the political empowerment of women in Algeria, was addressed through the constitutional amendment under Article 31 bis, and the passage of Organic Law No. 12-03 on January 12, 2012, which defines how to expand women's chances in elected councils. In fact, the establishment of an organization by the state responsible for defending women's rights represents, on a symbolic level, an acknowledgment of the importance of the issue raised by the feminist movement, and, practically, it could increase the opportunities for access to the political system for the representatives of this movement.

This phenomenon, through which social movements contribute to altering the political opportunity structure, has been underexplored by scholars working within the political opportunity movement. However, Kitschelt, one of the early theorists of this movement, considered this potential outcome of social movements in his classification of forms of influence, based on Gamson's classification, which distinguishes three types of impact:

1. **Substantive impact**, which involves changing the content of policies in accordance with the demands of the movement.
2. **Procedural impact**, which opens doors for participation by representatives of the movement, acknowledging them as legitimate interlocutors.
3. **Structural impact**, where the political opportunity structure is altered as a result of the movement's activities (KITSCHOLT, 1986).

However, the political opportunity structure has primarily been treated as an independent or external variable influencing the emergence and development of mobilization. Tarrow emphasized the need to consider political opportunity structure also as a dependent variable by studying how collective action can contribute to defining new political opportunities. Tarrow distinguishes these changes in opportunities based on the actors who are concerned with them.

- **The first case:** Social movement members view their political opportunity structure as a result of their actions. Through their activities, they establish organizations within the state that later facilitate their access to the political system, as seen in the case of pressure-based social movements.
- **The second case:** A social movement contributes to expanding the available opportunities for other groups. Tarrow provides the example of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, which led to the broadening of the traditional concept of rights. This extension benefited other movements in formulating their demands.
- **The third case:** A movement helps create opportunities for its opponents. For instance, when another group is threatened within the context of broader mobilization, it can indirectly encourage this group to develop collective action against it.
- **The fourth case:** A social movement creates opportunities for power elites. Others may adopt the protesters' causes to position themselves as champions of the people.

From this perspective, we view political opportunity structures from both the dependent and independent variable viewpoints, in their interaction with social movements.

Conclusion:

The effectiveness of social movements is deeply rooted in their ability to both influence and adapt to the political opportunity structures that exist within a society. These movements are not merely passive responses to existing political conditions but rather dynamic and transformative agents capable of reshaping those very structures. Social movements contribute to political change by challenging the status quo, creating new opportunities, and shifting public discourse. Their role is not limited to mere protest; they bring about significant transformations in political, social, and cultural frameworks by altering the interactions between various social and political actors. This interaction often leads to

profound shifts in the policy landscape, ultimately contributing to the democratization and modernization of societies.

In understanding social movements, it is crucial to consider the intersection of structural elements—such as political institutions, elite divisions, and the broader socio-economic context—with the subjective dimensions, such as the cultural frameworks and cognitive understandings of political opportunities. The way in which individuals and collective actors perceive and interpret the political environment is just as important as the structural opportunities available to them. Thus, a comprehensive approach to studying social movements must incorporate both the material and the cognitive factors that shape mobilization and action.

Moreover, social movements play a dual role by not only pursuing their own goals but also expanding opportunities for other marginalized or excluded groups. They often pave the way for broader societal and political changes, as seen in historical examples like the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. or the feminist movements globally. In doing so, they not only influence their own movements but also provide opportunities for opponents and political elites to reassess and adjust their strategies. This cyclical interaction between movements and political elites shows the deep interconnectedness of societal dynamics and highlights how social movements can create a more responsive and inclusive political environment.

To further enhance the effectiveness of social movements and ensure their sustained influence, it is essential to foster inclusive policymaking that considers the demands and perspectives of these movements. This process should not be seen as a threat but as an opportunity for democratic development and a reflection of societal diversity. Policymakers should engage with social movements proactively, creating spaces for dialogue, negotiation, and collaboration. Encouraging grassroots movements and strengthening their participation in decision-making processes can ensure that political outcomes reflect the needs and aspirations of all segments of society.

In conclusion, social movements are pivotal agents of change in contemporary societies. They challenge existing power structures, promote political participation, and provide new avenues for underrepresented groups to voice their concerns. As such, they play a critical role in shaping democratic societies. By understanding the multifaceted nature of political opportunities and mobilization, we can better harness the power of social movements to create a more just and equitable world.

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