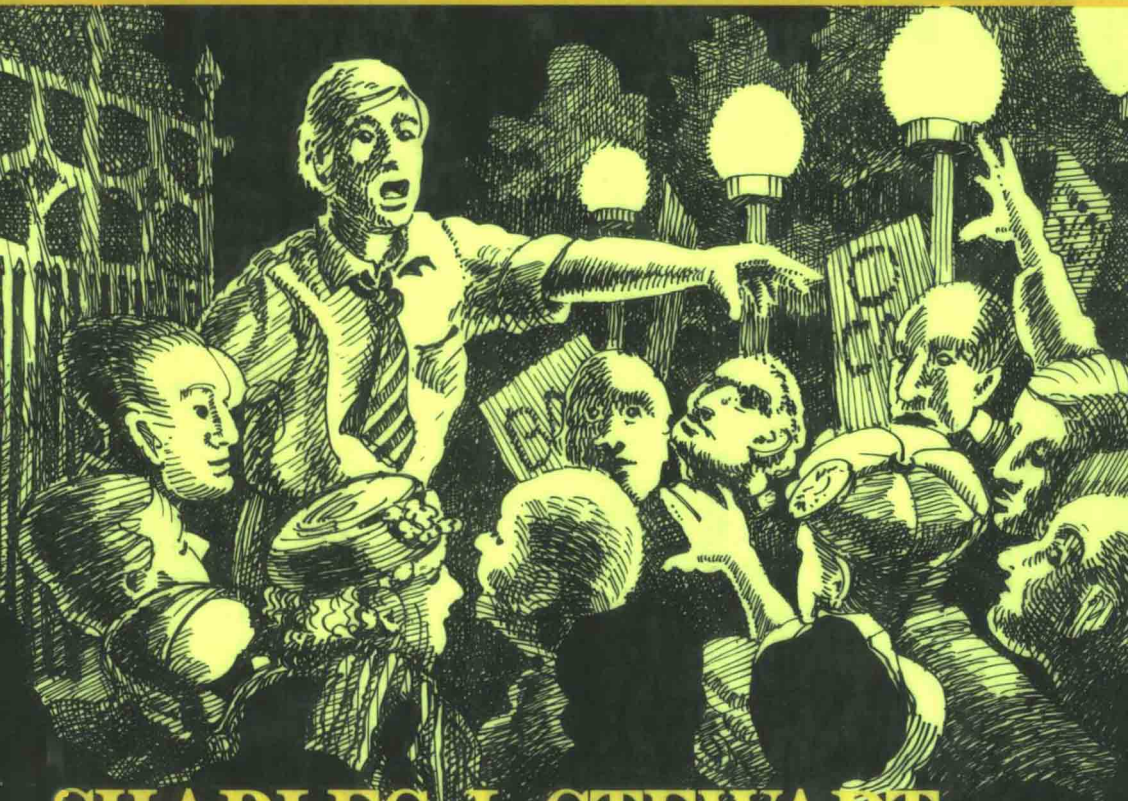


Second Edition

# PERSUASION AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS



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CRAIG ALLEN SMITH  
ROBERT E. DENTON, JR.

**PERSUASION  
AND  
SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**  
**Second Edition**

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Waveland Press, Inc.

P.O. Box 400

Prospect Heights, Illinois 60070

(312) 634-0081

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ISBN 0-88133-451-0

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Printed in the United States of America

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## Preface

Why a book about persuasion and social movements? Ever since neanderthals thought their tribe's "system" needed alterations, social movements have directly or indirectly provided the impetus for almost all important socio-political changes. In just over a century in our country alone, social movements have contributed to the freeing of the slaves, the end of child labor, the suffrage of blacks, women, and 18-20 year olds, the eight-hour workday and the forty-hour week, direct election of U.S. Senators, the graduated income tax, social security, collective bargaining, prohibition, the end of prohibition, and desegregation of public facilities and schools.

Nevertheless, only recently have people begun to regard social movements as *more than nuisances to be harshly corrected*. Studies of social movements were encouraged in the field of speech-communication as early as 1923, and they received periodic attention from such writers as Donald C. Bryant, Dallas Dickey, and Bower Aly. But the first serious discussion of *how* one should study the persuasive efforts of social movements did not appear until 1947 when S. Judson Crandell discussed social movement patterns developed by social psychologists and offered suggestions to the prospective rhetorical critic. Five years later, Leland Griffin's "The Rhetoric of Historical Movements" presented a rudimentary "rhetorical" pattern for movement studies and a workable approach to the criticism of social movements. The 1950s and 1960s witnessed an increased interest in the persuasive dimensions of social movements, but the intellectual advances were modest. Many studies fell into the ruts left by generations of rhetorical critics. For example, some authors spent most of their time trying to demonstrate that the "public speaking" in a movement was all important—at the expense of other kinds of communication. Other authors could not avoid pursuing the worst sort of "neo-Aristotelian" criticism. A 1964 master's thesis about the woman's suffrage movement, for example, asked whether the speakers were formally trained and whether their speeches were consistent with the classical teachings of invention, disposition, memory, style, and delivery. These early studies investigated few topics with the

thoroughness needed either for theory building or for the understanding of complex historical events.

This state of affairs began to change rapidly with the dawn of the 1970s, undoubtedly in part because social movements had become commonplace on most college campuses. Three publications more than any others helped us turn an intellectual corner. Herbert Simons' "Requirements, Problems, and Strategies: A Theory of Persuasion for Social Movements," published in 1970, was the first methodological statement since Griffin's 1952 article. Simons synthesized the notions of social-psychological resources, situational tasks, and rhetorical adaptation into an emphasis upon the social movement's management of its persuasive resources—a leader-centered approach to social movements. *The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control* by John Bowers and Donovan Ochs appeared the next year. It was the first book about persuasion and social movements that was not primarily a collection of speeches and the first to focus on the methods used by institutions to counter the persuasive efforts of social movements. Then in 1972 Simons wrote "Persuasion in Social Conflicts: A Critique of Prevailing Conceptions and a Framework for Future Research," arguing that most previous research had reflected an establishment bias by focusing on persuasive tactics more appropriate for the drawingroom than for the streets.

The contributions of these three works are evident in both the quantity and quality of social movement studies since the early 1970s. Most issues of speech-communication journals have included at least one "movement" study, and in 1980 an entire issue of the *Central States Speech Journal* was devoted to the study of persuasion and social movements. Literally hundreds of articles and book chapters have generated thought-provoking results, research approaches, and controversies. Many students of persuasion and social movements—whether undergraduates, graduates, or professors—have experienced difficulties in understanding and using the results and approaches and in resolving the controversies that have often appeared in brief and highly sophisticated journal articles. We conceived this book, in part, as a solution to this state of affairs. Our purpose was threefold: to synthesize, to extend, and to apply many of the findings, theories, and approaches generated since the late 1960s.

This book is divided into four parts. Part One focuses on the role of persuasion in social movements and includes chapters that explore the characteristics of social movements, their typical life cycle, the sources of leadership, a typology of political argument, a rhetoric of legitimacy, and the nature of resistance. Part Two contains chapters that outline three symbolic interactionist frameworks for studying social movement persuasion—a social systems model, a functional scheme, and a Burkean or dramaturgic approach. Part Three presents six studies of social movement persuasion. Three critical analyses examine the interdependence of personality and message appeal, the role of transcendent moral argument, and the role of narrative rationality in the mobilization of discontent, while three empirical studies

consider the persuasive functions of protest songs, slogans, and obscenities. Part Four contains conclusions and a comprehensive bibliography.

We have approached this book with five fundamental assumptions. The first assumption is that since persuasion is inherently practical, we can study it most profitably by examining the functions of persuasive acts. Second, we presume that even apparently irrational acts make sense to the actor—the trick is discovering the reasoning behind the act. Third, people create and comprehend their world through symbols, and it is people who create, use, ignore, or act upon these symbolic creations. Fourth, public speeches are an important form of social movement persuasion, but they are neither the most prevalent nor necessarily the most effective form. And fifth, we can rarely explain social movements as mere instances of orneriness, perversion, or ignorance. Someone once wryly observed that a rebel who loses is a traitor, while a rebel who wins is a founding father. These assumptions, as well as many of the first edition's arguments, struck some readers as heresy and still others as "old-hat." We hope this revised and expanded edition strikes a similar balance.

This book truly represents a joint undertaking by the three of us who have spent long hours in graduate seminars, at conventions, and during visits to one another's campuses discussing the persuasive efforts of social movements and, in particular, the topics included in this book. It may be of interest to note the primary contributions of each author. Charles Stewart was primarily responsible for chapters on the social movement as a unique collective phenomenon, the life cycle of social movements, the nature of leadership in social movements, a rhetoric of legitimation, a functional approach to movement persuasion, the rhetoric of transcendence, the persuasive functions of protest songs, and the selected bibliography. Craig Smith was primarily responsible for the preface and conclusions, the typology of political argument, the social systems approach to movements, and the studies of the John Birch Society and the Panama Canal controversy. Robert Denton was primarily responsible for the chapters on resistance, a Burkean approach to movement persuasion, and the analyses of the persuasive functions of slogans and obscenity.

Charles J. Stewart  
Craig Allen Smith  
Robert E. Denton, Jr.

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# Part One

## The Roles of Persuasion in Social Movements



## **Chapter 1**

# **The Social Movement as a Unique Collective Phenomenon**

The second half of the 20th century may well be called “the age of the social movement” in America. Blacks, students, women, the aged, gays, hispanic peoples, native Americans, prison inmates, and workers of all varieties from the vineyard to the university campus have demanded rights, equality, identity, and a fair share of the American dream. Others have organized to protest the American way of dying, involvement in unjustified wars, pollution and destruction of the environment, nuclear power, forced busing of public school students, violence and sex on television, legalized abortion, marijuana laws, centralized power in corporate, governmental, and educational bureaucracies, and changes in the American social structure and values. But this is not to say that social movements are new to the American scene. The American Revolution began as a social movement, and the 19th century witnessed great struggles to free the slaves, to improve working conditions and compensation, to reduce (and later to prohibit) the selling of alcoholic beverages, to gain equal rights for women, and to return religion to the fundamentals of the Bible.

In our efforts to understand and to explain the bewildering variety of protests and demands that have affected our lives during the past quarter-century and the lives of our predecessors during the past two centuries of American history, we have attached a forest of labels to “social movement” phenomena such as political, historical, rhetorical, reform, revisionary, nationalistic, resistance, conservative, and individualistic. This plethora of labels, coupled with the tendency to select labels that denigrate social movements (radical, reactionary, revolutionary, repressive) and the tendency to attach the name “movement” to virtually all collective phenomena (internal change within groups, social movement organizations, campaigns, violent revolutions, civil wars, trends, fads, manias, and panics), have confused our efforts to understand the social movement as a unique collective phenomenon.

Attempts to define the term “social movement” have added to rather than lessened the confusion and disagreement. For instance, some writers have developed “collective action” definitions. William Bruce Cameron says “a social movement occurs when a fairly large number of people band together in order to alter or to supplant some portion of the existing culture or social order.”<sup>1</sup> And Malcolm Sillars, in an attempt to “cast the widest net,” defines social movements as “collective actions which are perceived by a critic.”<sup>2</sup> These definitions appear to encompass all collective actions and do not distinguish the social movement from collective actions such as political campaigns, civil wars, or efforts by members of Congress to reform their procedures.

Other writers have developed more precise “social psychological” definitions. For example, John Wilson writes that a social movement is “a conscious, collective, organized attempt to bring about or to resist large scale change in the social order by noninstitutionalized means.”<sup>3</sup> And Herbert Simons defines a social movement as an “uninstitutionalized collectivity that mobilizes for action to implement a program for the reconstitution of social norms or values.”<sup>4</sup> Social psychological definitions address more precisely *what* a social movement *is* and *is not*, but they do not address *how* this collective phenomenon achieves its goals.

A third group of writers have developed “rhetorical” definitions of social movements. Charles Wilkinson, for instance, defines social movements as “linguaging strategies by which a significantly vocal part of an established society, experiencing together a sustained dialectical tension growing out of moral (ethical) conflict, agitate to induce cooperation in others, either directly or indirectly, and thereby affecting the status quo.”<sup>5</sup> Wilkinson’s definition addresses precisely *how* a social movement achieves its goals but not precisely *what* a social movement is and is not. Robert Cathcart’s definition comes closer to identifying both how and what: “A social movement can be said to emerge when the languaging strategies of a change-seeking collective clash with the languaging strategies of the establishment and thereby produce the perception of a group’s operating outside the established social hierarchy.”<sup>6</sup>

If we are to comprehend the social movement as a unique collective action in which persuasion is pervasive, then we must be able to determine if the phenomenon under investigation is in fact a “social movement.” Each current definition, whether collective action, social psychological, or rhetorical, makes important but partial contributions to this comprehension. In this chapter, we attempt, first, to identify the essential characteristics of social movements and, second, to develop a complete definition that distinguishes social movements from other collective actions and identifies the functions of persuasion.

### An Organized Collectivity

*A social movement has at least minimal organization.* If we cannot identify leaders (or spokespersons), membership (or followers or believers), and one or more organizations, the phenomenon we are studying is a trend, fad, or social unrest, not a social movement.<sup>7</sup> The degree of organization and visibility varies considerably from one movement to another. For instance, Martin Luther King, Jr., leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, was an internationally known leader of the black civil rights movement, but it would be difficult for most people to name a single leader or organization of the gay rights or native American rights movements. Leaders, members, and organizations of social movements that employ frequent public demonstrations are more visible than ones that choose to operate through the press, courts, in small groups, or primarily within the social movement community.

The mass media, as Chesebro and Howe have noted, may create the illusion of a social movement by treating “relatively isolated, but similar, rhetorical situations throughout the nation... as a single, dynamic and inter-related phenomenon.”<sup>8</sup> For example, the “death of God theology” attracted a great deal of media coverage and appeared to be a booming social movement when, in fact, no leaders, membership, or organization existed.<sup>9</sup> The death of God theology was a fascinating phenomenon but not a social movement.

Social movements and campaigns are often confused even though they have significant differences.<sup>10</sup> Unlike social movements, campaigns tend to be organized from the top down. Some person or group designates a campaign manager who in turn selects a staff and then organizes and runs the campaign. A social movement leader (or more typically leaders) is usually selected from the protest group as it develops and discovers the need for such a person. Campaigns have managers with assigned roles, organizational charts, chiefs of staff, schedules of operations, a specific goal, and a known end-point such as election day or the date a fund drive or membership drive is to “go over the top.” A social movement may last for decades or months, must be flexible as circumstances change, can rarely obtain or maintain tight control over unpaid volunteers, and often alters and adds to its goals as it proceeds.

Social movement organizations are often confused with social movements. The National Organization for Reform of Marijuana Laws (N.O.R.M.L.), the National Organization for Women (N.O.W.), the American Indian Movement (A.I.M.), and the John Birch Society are social movement organizations, not social movements. Each is *one* organization of *several* striving to change the image of marijuana and laws governing its use, working for women’s rights, trying to regain rights for native



Americans, or attempting to prevent or to reverse changes in American norms and values.

In our efforts to comprehend complex social movements, we have too often tried to simplify them and to compare them with collective actions we know best: political campaigns, political parties, and governmental or corporate bodies. Efforts have been frustrating because social movements rarely proceed in an orderly step-by-step manner, contain one supreme leader who controls *the* organization, appeal to a single target audience, have a carefully defined and identifiable membership, or strive to attain a single, well-defined goal through the employment of one persuasive strategy. *Minimal* organization is both necessity and reality for most social movements.

### **An Uninstitutionalized Collectivity**

*A social movement is an uninstitutionalized collectivity.* A social movement is not part of an established order that governs and changes social, political, religious, or economic norms and values.<sup>11</sup> Thus, moves by the Roman Catholic hierarchy to alter its liturgy, or by members of Congress to reform committee membership, or by the United Auto Workers Union to gain a better contract are not social movements.<sup>12</sup> These are establishments changing themselves and achieving goals through institutionalized means and procedures. A social movement may try to persuade members of the established order (legislators, governors, judges) to change or to aid its program for change, but it ceases to be a social movement if it becomes part of the established order.

Herbert Simons has maintained that the uninstitutionalized nature of social movements presents leaders with “extraordinary rhetorical dilemmas” in requirements they must fulfill, problems they face, and strategies they may adopt to meet these requirements.<sup>13</sup> David Zarefsky counters Simons’ position by arguing that “establishment” movements such as Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty” have rhetorical careers “identical to that of a social movement” and that the major dilemmas Simons cites “are not unique to persuasive campaigns mounted by uninstitutionalized collectivities.”<sup>14</sup> After discussing three “establishment movements,” Zarefsky concludes that “officially sanctioned organizations do not always have controls to assure effectiveness.”

Although success is never assured for any collective endeavor, a comparison of the situations uninstitutionalized and institutionalized groups confront suggest that social movements do indeed encounter unique persuasive problems and handicaps. The social movement is always an