

PERSUASION AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

T H I R D E D I T I O N



**CHARLES J. STEWART
CRAIG ALLEN SMITH
ROBERT E. DENTON, JR.**

PERSUASION AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

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CHARLES J. STEWART

Purdue University

CRAIG ALLEN SMITH

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

ROBERT E. DENTON, JR.

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University



Prospect Heights, Illinois

For information about this book, write or call:

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Preface

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 forty-hour week, direct election of U.S. Senators, the graduated income tax, social security, collective bargaining, prohibition of alcoholic beverages, 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 communication as early as 1923, and they received periodic attention from such writers as Donald C. Bryant, Dallas Dickey, and Bower Aly. 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 analyst. 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 analysis 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 analysts. 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 kind of "neo-Aristotelian" criticism. A 1964 master's thesis about the women'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.

The 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 and could no longer be avoided or ignored. 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 drawing room 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. Issues of many communication journals have included at least one "movement" study, and in 1980 and 1991 entire issues of the *Central States Speech Journal* and *Communication Studies* were 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 these 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, extend, and apply many of the findings, theories, and approaches generated since the 1960s in the fields of sociology and social psychology as well as communication.

Chapters 1 through 4 focus on the role of persuasion in social movements and include topics that explore the characteristics of social movements, the social movement from a social systems perspective, the persuasive functions of social movements, and the typical life cycle of social movements. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the sources of leadership and how social movements address the needs of members, particularly democratic and authoritarian character structures. Chapters 7 and 8 focus on the strategies social movements employ to attain legitimacy and the strategies institutions use to resist social movements. Chapters 9, 10, and 11 focus on the symbolism and symbolic acts of social movements, particularly the theories of Kenneth Burke, language strategies, and the persuasive functions of protest music. Chapters 12, 13, and 14 focus on the argumentative strategies of social movements and counter-movements, including types of

argument, argument from narrative vision, and argument from transcendence. Chapter 15 serves as a summary of the major principles and findings of this book.

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 movement 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 patriot and founder. These assumptions may strike some readers as heresy and still others as “old-hat.” We hope this revised, restructured, and up-dated edition strikes a similar balance.

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

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Chapter One

The Social Movement as a Unique Collective Phenomenon

The second half of the twentieth century may well be called “the age of the social movement” in America. African Americans, Hispanic Americans, native Americans, women, gays, college students, prison inmates, and workers from the vineyard to the university campus have demanded rights, equality, identity, and a fair share of the American dream. Organizations have formed to protest American involvement in military conflicts, destruction of the environment, nuclear power plants, violence and sex on television, legalized abortion, marijuana laws, abuse of animals for research and profit, centralized power in corporate, governmental, and educational bureaucracies, and revolutionary changes in American social structures, norms, and values. For every movement created to bring about change, a countermovement determined to resist change with all available resources also appears.

Social movements, of course, did not arrive upon the American scene with the advent of the 1950s. A great many colonists came to America to escape persecution for their beliefs and their fledgling social movements in England and Europe. The American Revolution began as a social movement before it evolved into a full-scale military conflict. And the nineteenth century witnessed great struggles to free the slaves, improve working conditions and compensation, reduce (and later to prohibit) the selling of alcoholic beverages, gain equal rights for women, and return religion to the fundamentals of the Bible.

In our efforts to understand, explain, and manage the bewildering variety of demands, protests, events, and changes that have affected American lives during the past half-century, and the lives of our ancestors during the previous centuries of American history, we tend to call them *movements* whether they are internal changes within established groups, protest organizations, campaigns, uprisings, riots, violent revolutions, civil wars, trends, fads, or crazes. Since many of these *movements* have obvious differences, we often attach modifiers such as social,

political, religious, historical, rhetorical, reform, revisionary, nationalistic, resistance, conservative, and individualistic. If we are suspicious or fearful of movements—or downright hostile—we may call them radical, reactionary, revolutionary, repressive, or fanatical. Some groups may call themselves movements to claim size, importance, and influence far beyond reality.¹ The result leads to confusion rather than to an understanding of movements.

This book focuses on the persuasive efforts of one unique collective phenomenon designed to bring about or resist change, the *social movement*. What is a social movement? How is it similar to and different from other collective phenomena called movements? Attempts to define the term have often added to rather than lessened confusion and disagreement. For example, some writers have proposed “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.”² Malcolm Sillars, in an attempt to “cast the widest net,” defines social movements as “collective actions which are perceived by a critic.”³ These definitions appear to encompass all collective actions and do not distinguish the social movement from presidential campaigns, political action committees (PACs), United Way campaigns, or petition drives to prevent sexual orientation clauses from being added to municipal human rights ordinances.

Others have developed “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.”⁴ Herbert Simons defines social movements as “struggles on behalf of a cause by groups whose core organizations, modes of action, and/or guiding ideas are not fully legitimated by the larger society.”⁵ 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 or differs from civil wars, revolutions, or lobbying groups.

Other theorists 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.”⁶ Wilkinson’s definition addresses more precisely *how* a social movement achieves its goals but not precisely *what* a social movement is and is not. For instance, is a large and vocal group of Christians demanding the right to display a nativity scene on the courthouse lawn at Christmas time a social movement? Robert Cathcart’s definition comes closer to identifying both how and what: “A social movement can be said to emerge when the linguaging strategies of a change-seeking collective clash with the linguaging strategies of the establishment and thereby produce the perception of a group’s operating outside the established social hierarchy.”⁷

If we are to comprehend the persuasive efforts of social movements, then we must be able to determine if the particular phenomenon under investigation is

a social movement or at least a portion of a social movement. Current collective action, social psychological, and rhetorical definitions make important but partial contributions to this comprehension. In this chapter, we attempt to identify the essential characteristics of social movements and the pervasiveness of persuasion in such efforts to bring about or resist change.

An Organized Collectivity

*A social movement has at least minimal organization. If we cannot identify leaders (spokespersons), membership (followers or believers), and organizations, the phenomenon under study is a trend, a fad, or unrest, not a social movement.⁸ A phenomenon such as the current "men's movement," in which groups of men attend weekend retreats to pour out their hearts and to seek comfort in brotherhood, may eventually develop into a full-fledged social movement if organizations develop, leaders other than poets and writers emerge, and memberships develop.⁹ The degree of organization, visibility of leaders, and nature of membership varies from movement to movement. For instance, Martin Luther King, Jr. of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Roy Wilkins of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Malcolm X of the Black Muslims were internationally known leaders of the black rights movement. Although it would be difficult for most of us to name a single leader or organization of the gay rights or environmental movements, two highly visible and active social movements in the 1990s, they do exist, have sizeable memberships, and are essential for the continued existence and progress of each movement. Leaders, members, and organizations that stage frequent public demonstrations and media events, such as pro-life's Operation Rescue and environmentalism's Greenpeace, are more visible than ones that operate primarily through the courts, in small groups, or within the social movement community such as the National Right to Life Committee and the Sierra Club. All must have at least minimal organization to qualify as social movements.

The mass media, as James Chesebro and Roger 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 interrelated phenomenon."¹⁰ For example, the "death of God theology" attracted a great deal of media coverage and attention of religious leaders in the late 1970s and early 1980s and appeared to be a booming social movement when, in fact, no leaders, membership, or organization existed.¹¹ The same can be said for the "secular humanist conspiracy" seen as a powerful, demonic social movement by Christian fundamentalists in the 1980s and 1990s. Although they could point to writings of self-styled secular humanists and to Secular Humanist Manifestos I and II issued by small groups of philosophers in 1933 and 1973, the secular changes continuing in the United States are decades-old trends.¹² There is no evidence of organizations, leaders, demonstrations, or campaigns urging teenagers to have sex, husbands and wives to divorce, or God-fearing people to stop attending

churches and synagogues. Thus, a secular movement but not a secular humanist social movement has apparently altered norms and values in American life during the twentieth century.

Social movements and campaigns are often confused, partly because social movements employ campaigns to achieve specific goals. For instance, the Clamshell Alliance in New Hampshire conducted numerous campaigns to keep the Seabrook Nuclear Power Plant from being constructed and operated; Earth First! has conducted many campaigns to stop logging operations in the northwest.¹³ Although campaigns and social movements share similarities, they have significant differences.¹⁴ Social movements tend to be organized from the bottom up while campaigns tend to be organized from the top down.¹⁵ A leader of a social movement usually rises from a protest group as it develops and discovers the need for such a person, often an evolutionary process. A campaign leader, on the other hand, is usually a manager designated by an organization's decision makers; the manager in turn selects and organizes a staff and runs the campaign. Campaigns, whether run by a social movement organization, political party, corporation, political action committee, or university development office, have managers with assigned roles, organizational charts, chiefs of staff, schedules of operations, specific goals, and known end-points such as election day or the date a fund or membership drive is to "go over the top." For example, native American movement organizations organize protests when the Atlanta Braves or Washington Redskins play in the World Series or Super Bowl, but these protests (brief social movement campaigns) end when the sports events end. By contrast, social movements may last for decades, must change as circumstances change, rarely maintain tight control over memberships, and often alter and add to goals as they proceed. No social movement knows when, if ever, it will achieve its ends and disband.

Social movement organizations are often confused with social movements. The National Organization for Women (NOW), the American Indian Movement (AIM), People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), and Greenpeace are social movement organizations, not social movements. Each is *one* organization of several striving for equality for women, native American rights, humane treatment of wild and domestic animals, and protection of the environment. To fully understand the persuasive efforts of the animal rights movement, for instance, we must analyze the messages of all the organizations of the movement, including the Friends of Animals, the Animal Protection Institute of America, Beauty Without Cruelty International, Trans-Species Unlimited, the Animal Welfare Institute, Humans Against Rabbit Exploitation (HARE), and PETA. Thus, while one or more organizations are a necessary component for a collective action to qualify as a social movement, a single organization is *not* synonymous with the movement.

Although minimal organization is a hallmark of social movements, it frequently never expands to a higher level of organization. The reality is that social movements never proceed in orderly step-by-step fashion, 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.

An Uninstitutionalized Collectivity

* *A social movement is an uninstitutionalized collectivity.* No social movement or social movement organization is part of an established order that governs and changes social, political, religious, or economic norms and values.¹⁶ “Movements” by the Roman Catholic hierarchy to alter its liturgy, members of Congress to reform its ethical standards, bankers to revise lending policies, or the United Auto Workers Union to gain a better contract with Ford Motor Company are not social movements.¹⁷ These are establishments changing themselves and striving for goals through institutionalized means and procedures. Primary impetus for change comes from within rather than from without.

In efforts to comprehend the persuasive efforts of complex social movements, we have too often assumed they are no different from the collective actions of political parties, PACs, legislatures, religious organizations, and corporations. Social movements operate from *outside* of established institutions. Social movements often attempt to persuade members of established orders (legislators, governors, judges, bishops, trustees, industrialists, actors and actresses) to change or to support programs for change, but they cease to be social movements if they become part of an established order.

The “outsider” or uninstitutionalized nature of social movements, according to Herbert Simons and others, presents leaders with “extraordinary rhetorical dilemmas” in requirements they must fulfill, problems they face, and strategies they may adopt to meet these requirements.¹⁸ David Zarefsky counters this position by arguing that “establishment movements” such as President Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty” have rhetorical careers identical to that of a social movement and that major rhetorical dilemmas “are not unique to persuasive campaigns mounted by uninstitutionalized collectivities.”¹⁹ 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 persuasive effort, a comparison of the situations uninstitutionalized social movements and institutionalized established orders confront suggests the social movements do indeed encounter unique persuasive requirements and handicaps. Social movements are always “out-groups” viewed by society as illegitimate.²⁰ They are criticized for not handling conflicts and controversies through normal, proper channels and procedures, even when these channels and procedures are denied them. Social movements have virtually no powers of reward and punishment beyond personal recognition or expulsion, and expulsion often leads to competing organizations created by the exiled. They have neither legislative nor enforcement powers and no assured means of financial support. Monetary funds are fractions of those available to established governments, churches, political parties, labor unions, and corporations.


Uninstitutionalized leaders survive only as long as they perform the necessary tasks well, and when new tasks or abilities are required, leaders may be unceremoniously discarded. Leaders have minimal control over single factions or fragile coalitions of movement organizations and none over important establishments such as courts, investigative agencies, and boards of trustees. Rarely can they bring most of a social movement's resources to bear on a single event, let alone a persuasive campaign. The mass media devote little space or air time to social movements, are rarely favorable toward them (unless success appears near), are rarely controlled by social movements (although some social movements are adept at manipulating media to attain coverage), and provide exposure only when a social movement does something spectacular or stupid. Social movement organizations rarely have the money to purchase significant space or air time to present their cases directly to the American people. Persuasion is the sole means available to most social movements to accomplish such functions as transforming perceptions of reality, prescribing courses of action, and mobilizing the discontented.

The institutionalized group, on the other hand, is always an "in-group" viewed by society as legitimate. It strives to maintain at least the appearance of dealing with conflicts and controversies through normal, proper channels and procedures. Most institutions have immense powers of reward and punishment since they control law enforcement agencies, investigative groups, regulatory agencies, legislative bodies, political parties, tax authorities, courts, prisons, lucrative positions, church hierarchies, and bureaucracies. They may keep disgruntled people in line by enhancing their economic well-being, threatening their membership status, amending pieces of legislation, or granting or withholding contracts or licenses. Leaders may serve guaranteed terms of from two years to life, enjoy the support of organized and well-financed groups, and have opportunities to advance within corporate, political, or church hierarchies. Funding is much less a problem for institutionalized groups. Legislatures have access to millions or billions of tax dollars; political parties and PACs can raise millions of dollars through computerized mailings; chambers of commerce may raise dues; and large corporations such as Mobil Oil have vast resources to counter environmentalists.²¹ Institutionalized groups and leaders are newsworthy and demand attention of the media. They may command multiple network and front page coverage of trivial as well as consequential speeches, press conferences, conventions, announcements, meetings of stockholders or bishops, ceremonies, and events. The president's cat or dog may draw more media attention than a social movement's demonstration. At the same time, institutions may stifle uncooperative or unfriendly media by threatening not to provide certain reporters or networks with seats on campaign planes, access to leaders, or entry into restricted areas, by threatening to unleash regulatory agencies (such as the FCC) or to create new regulations and restrictions, and by threatening to withdraw advertising. The president may gain international attention merely by strolling through the White House rose garden, visiting a "typical" American family, or attending a baseball game. All major networks and newspapers are owned by

institutionalized groups devoted to maintaining societal norms and values and making a profit, and whatever support they give social movements is likely to be implicit rather than explicit.

Zarefsky may be correct in arguing that “establishment movements,” or more accurately establishment campaigns, follow rhetorical careers similar to social movements. However, it is difficult to believe that the president of the United States or the public relations arm of Mobil Oil, even when following similar rhetorical patterns, have no advantages over the loosely knit social movement and, indeed, face identical persuasive requirements and dilemmas. H. Ross Perot demonstrated effectively during the 1992 presidential campaign what an American billionaire can accomplish in a few months with institutional connections, unlimited funds, and access to long blocks of uninterrupted, primetime television. No social movement has such connections, funds, or access to the media. Efforts to bring about changes through institutions—as seen in efforts of African Americans, women, and gays—have proven fragmentary, slow, and ephemeral. The gay rights movement, for example, is now experiencing a backlash that threatens many of the gains it has made over the past twenty years.²² Hundreds of provisions of environmental laws, passed after years of agitation by environmental groups, were simply set aside from 1988 to 1992 by Vice President Dan Quayle’s secretive Council on Competitiveness to eliminate “unnecessary and burdensome” government regulations that were allegedly making American companies noncompetitive.²³

Large in Scope

 *A Social Movement is large in scope.* The social movement must be large enough—in terms of geographical area, time, events, and participants—to achieve its goals.²⁴ Scope alone distinguishes social movements from most pressure groups, religious cults, lobbies, PACs, campaigns, and protests. Unlike these phenomena, social movements are usually national or international in scope, sustain efforts for years, select many leaders, create many organizations, conduct many membership drives, design many campaigns, expand and constrict ideologies, set and alter many goals, and employ many strategies.

Social movements in the United States cannot afford to be characterized as “small” because small ventures tend to be seen as insignificant or dangerous and therefore to be ignored, ridiculed, or suppressed. The tragic end of Ranch Apocalypse in Waco, Texas in 1993, in which eighty-five Branch Davidians died in a fiery inferno with leader David Koresh after a fifty-one-day stand-off with government authorities, illustrates what might happen when a small, seemingly dangerous group confronts institutions. Oliver and Marwell note that “One person marching for a thousand hours is not the same as a thousand people marching for one hour.”²⁵ Institutions and their supporters went to great length in the 1960s to characterize the anti-war, student rights, and black power movements as small groups of radicals, sex perverts, traitors, cowards, racists, and degenerates clearly