

Book Review

Understanding Social Movements: Theories from the Classical Era to the Present

By Steven M. Buechler

Paradigm Publishers. 2011. 257 pages. \$33.95 paper, \$105 cloth.

Reviewer: Katia Pilati, *University of Geneva, Switzerland*

This book is extremely interesting reading. It provides a thoughtful assessment of the foundational statements of social movement scholarship by providing an in-depth analysis of the classics—Marx, Durkheim and Weber, among others—and the concepts advanced by such scholars to interpret and explain collective actions. In addition, Buechler provides a discussion of the historical development of some crucial advancements in the social movement theory, including the social movement classic agenda—the resource mobilization theory, the political process model, the framing perspective and the new social movements theory—and the debates and synthesis elaborated up to today.

In this framework, the author has the merit to recall the abundant literature grounding the social movement analyses and to bring back the attention to sometimes forgotten concepts. This is of particularly utmost importance in light of a widespread approach among scholars, often neglecting theoretical discussions in favor of very sophisticated methodological analyses. For this reasons, the book is a key reading for graduate students who are approaching the social movement literature. Furthermore, it is an essential source for those scholars who aim to get an overview of social movement theoretical underpinnings before reading more in-depth accounts.

This invitation to read the book is nonetheless complemented by the identification of three minor flaws I would like to underline. First, within the broad theoretical overview offered and considering the wide range of classical scholarship taken into consideration, the author omits to provide a critical account of Simmel's contribution to the social movement literature. This is especially important in light of social movements relational approaches—more distinctively network approaches—which largely draw on the Simmelian perspective, for instance, on [Simmel's \(1922 \[1955\]\)](#) “Conflict and the Web of Group Affiliations.”

Second, despite the book's effort to bridge a dialogue between the historical sociological accounts and social movement theories, I think the author somehow misses to fully and critically discuss how such an historical overview helps

to bring to the forefront the use of concepts partly left in the shadow by dominant approaches to social movements. The book emphasizes that concepts such as social classes, inequalities and asymmetrical distribution of resources are part of the social movement scholarship background. Yet the attention to structural constraints expressed by dominant approaches in the last decades, namely, the political process model mostly concerned with political related variables as “political opportunity structures,” has tended to leave aside the socioeconomic dimension. As a consequence, in the framework of the recent economic crisis, the author could have discussed how classical categories of differentiation, like social class, intertwine with more fashionable categories related to dominant approaches in explaining, for instance, dynamics related to the (in) capacity of precarious people to mobilize and to become a social movement. Which concepts reviewed by Buechler would explain that some constituencies sometimes fail to mobilize while others succeed, as in the Occupy Wall Street Movement or the Indignados protests? Which place does labor occupy in current dominant theories?

A third weakness is related to an approach that many social movement scholars share at the empirical level, maybe linked to a certain lack of interest towards what occurs outside the United States or the Western context. As appropriately admitted by Buechler himself (4), being written by a U.S. scholar, the discussion of contentious politics is mainly attentive to the United States. Such U.S.-centric vision implies that many empirical cases have been necessarily overlooked. This nonetheless, Buechler could have discussed in more detail if and how the concepts and theories reviewed in his book help explaining contentious politics in non-Western contexts. Specifically, how far do Western social movement theories go in explaining the social unrest and political turmoil occurred during the civilian turbulences in African countries such as the protests around the Niger Delta in the last decades, the insurgent actions in Ivory Coast in 2010 or the recent Arab Spring uprisings?

The lack of attention to non-Western contexts is probably even more problematic with respect to recent forms of collective actions highlighted by Buechler—transnational activism and cyberactivism on the Internet. A broader empirical view may have partly anticipated a discussion on the widespread use of information and communications technology (ICTs) in non-democratic contexts, as occurred during the Arab Spring uprisings. With regard to transnational activism, although Buechler cites the arguments advanced by world-system theories, a broader view to non-Western contexts may have helped the author to fully discuss the challenges posed by such theories, for example, considering North–South world relationships and power asymmetries, overcoming a narrow view that often neglects them.

Reference

Simmel, Georg. 1922 [1955]. *Conflict and the Web of Group-Affiliations*. The Free Press.