

# The Transformative Power of Social Movements

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## Abstract

Social movements possess transformative and progressive power. In this paper, I argue that how this is so, or even if this is so, depends on one's explanatory framework. I consider three such explanatory frameworks for social movements: methodological individualism, collectivism, and complexity theory. In evaluating the various appeals and weaknesses of these frameworks, I show that complexity theory is uniquely poised to capture the complex and dynamic reality of the social world.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

How can social movements be reliable engines for progressive social transformation? Historically, major theories of social movements implied that they cannot and associated them with fundamental irrationality and mob-like behavior (Kornhauser, 1959; Le Bon, 1977). The success and popularity of the social movements of the 1960s turned the tables, and a new consensus was formed about the necessity of social movements for a healthy democracy. However, little agreement was found about mechanisms through which movements bring about meaningful change.

The divergence among theories of change brought attention to the underlying explanatory frameworks and their suitability to capture the complex and dynamic nature of social movements (Della Porta & Diani, 2020; Escobar, 2017; McAdam et al., 2003; Tilly, 2001). For example, in the social scientific literature on social movements, structural theories focused on political opportunities as the most important success factor for social movements (Goodwin et al., 1999; Meyer & Minkoff, 2004). Other theories took their success to be the product of collective identities (Diani & Mische, 2015; Habermas, 1981; Melucci, 1989; Tilly, 2002; Tilly & Tarrow, 2005), networks (Diani & Mische, 2015), available resources (Jenkins, 1983), or changes in emotions (Jasper, 2011; Polletta, 2002; Polletta & Jasper, 2001).

Philosophical discussions about social movements, however, have taken a different path. Despite the influence of social movements on various forms of philosophical inquiry (Klores, 2016), philosophers have, with few exceptions, evaded discussion of how movements make progress.<sup>1</sup> They primarily treat movements as either miraculously constructive or hopelessly catastrophic black boxes. But even among those few who elaborate processes of change—

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especially in addressing oppression, inequity, or injustice—disagreements about background explanatory frameworks remain implicit and cause various limitations in their resulting views. My goal in this paper is to make these constraints explicit and highlight potential sites for improvement.

In what follows, I roughly categorize significant philosophical contributions to the literature on social movements into three groups, each corresponding to a major framework of explanation. Through this categorization, I examine how these frameworks impact common responses to three pivotal questions about movements: How is collective action through movements possible? What kind of progress can movements bring about in terms of creating a more just society? How do they generate meaningful change? I start with Methodological Individualism and its challenge for any form of collective action. Then, I discuss the collectivist responses to this challenge and their limitations. Finally, I will explore the recent developments in the complexity approach and its potential to solve various puzzles about social movements.

## 2 | RELEVANT CONCEPTS

Social movements refer to various extra-institutional forms of collective action that maintain some temporal continuity (Snow et al., 2018).<sup>2</sup> Most theories of social movements conceptualize them as endogenous responses to perceived needs to seek or halt change and often as a challenge to formal or informal authorities (Snow et al., 2018). Thus, the expectations, predictions, and even moral status of social movements vary depending on different formulations of collective action, progress, and mechanisms of change. These formulations are in part constrained by background explanatory assumptions and their ontological and methodological commitments. Methodological Individualism, collectivism, and the complexity approach represent the most influential frameworks in discussions about social movements and their progressive potentials.

### 2.1 | Methodological Individualism

Methodological Individualism is one of the most influential and controversial explanatory frameworks in both the social sciences and philosophy (Brannan, 2002; Kincaid, 1986; Udehn, 2002). This approach is individualistic in its ontology because it takes individual persons to be the primary units of social, political, and moral analysis. It benefits from the appeal of the intuition that individuals are the only thinking and feeling actors of society (von Mises, 2006). This view is also methodological because of the belief that social phenomena “should always be understood as resulting from the decisions, actions, attitudes, etc. of human individuals, and that we should never be satisfied by an explanation in terms of so-called ‘collectives’ (states, nations, races, etc.)” (Popper, 1945).

Most Methodological Individualists are skeptics about social movements' ability to be reliable engines of meaningful social progress. They especially oppose theories that take for granted the possibility of collective action, which is often assumed to be necessary for the success of such movements. Mancur Olson (1965), for example, argued that despite common beliefs about group action, *self-interested* and *rational* individuals in a group would not necessarily act to achieve their common objective even if doing so would be in the best interest of all parties involved. For example, parties engage in activities that pollute the environment even though they would all be better off not doing so. The bigger the group, Olson argued, the higher the risk of free riding—polluting the environment in our example—and the greater the incentive to prioritize self-interest for all involved parties.<sup>3</sup> This conflict between individual and group incentives is known as the Collective Action Problem. It is often understood as an n-person prisoner's dilemma and is used to conceptualize various aspects of society and social interactions (Hardin, 1982; Heath, 1997; Runciman & Sen, 1965).

How do we solve Collective Action Problems? Methodological Individualists argue that an external rule enforcing authority can incentivize collective action. This emphasis on external authority is also present in the liberal conception

of a “well-ordered” society in which formal institutions create an environment where citizens accept principles of cooperation (justice) and expect others to do the same (Rawls, 1974). A similar rationale also grounds liberal conceptions of progress. Those who defend the possibility of social and moral progress (Kitcher, 2011; Moody-Adams, 1999, 2017; Singer, 1981) take it to be correcting bias in institutions that allow cooperation but somehow deviate from the ideals of equality and freedom (Anderson, 2014; Jamieson, 2017; Kitcher, 2021; Moody-Adams, 1999, 2017).

Social movements, however, lack institutional provision to take collective action. Thus, Methodological Individualists caution us against assuming that individuals will simply support a movement or properly act on its behalf even if doing so is in their best interest (Olson, 1965). Indeed, initiation costs for social movements are incredibly high. Even when more than a few are committed to the movement, opposing institutional power and majority rule is very risky and can put individuals in serious harm's way. The success of some authoritarian regimes in silencing protests and movements is further evidence of collective action's logic. Some argue that these weaknesses rule out any significant progressive potential for social movement (Sankaran, 2020).

However, groups do act collectively without any external authority (Ostrom, 1990). Mass-scale social movements also happen, and some are undoubtedly successful (Crutchfield, 2018). Many argue that Olson's narrow view of rationality and human interactions are to blame for the shortcomings of his formulation and its predictions (Dietz et al., 2003; Ferejohn & Pasquino, 2001). But at the same time, the consensus is that “Simply assuming that individuals are successfully socialized into seeking better group outcomes does not explain the obvious fact that groups often fail to obtain jointly beneficial outcomes” (Ostrom, 2009, p. 195).

In sum, a comprehensive understanding of social movements necessitates recognition of both the potential and the challenges of achieving successful collective action on a large scale. A methodologically individualist approach, as represented by Olson's view, emphasizes the constant conflict in individuals' incentives. This emphasis, even though plausible, renders the likelihood of success negligible and takes social movements to be unreliable vehicles for meaningful change. In the following section, I explore collectivism, which assumes greater harmony among individuals' incentives. But as I show, this assumption comes at the cost of neglecting the struggles inherent to collective action on a mass scale. Assuming harmony in incentives dismisses the complexity of our social life and the requirements to change.

## 2.2 | Collectivism

Collectivism stands in contrast to Methodological Individualism, sometimes ontologically but always methodologically. Some collectivist approaches share the ontological commitment to individuals as the primary unit of analysis and treat collectives as aggregates of individuals with shared attributes. Some others allow groups to have a somewhat more independent ontology than individuals. Methodologically, however, all collectivist approaches differ from Methodological Individualism in their comfort with using collective entities and properties in their analysis.

The approach to social movements of Rawls is a perfect example of an ontologically prudent version of collectivism and its struggle with the Collective Action Problem. Rawls famously considers non-violent civil disobedience the only plausible form of social movement capable of advancing justice. This involves collective and non-violent breaches of the law by people who respect their regime and are willing to accept the consequences of their disobedience. Rawls believes that social movements can lead to progress by entering the public discourse and pressuring the majority to acknowledge the legitimacy of their claims “in view of the common sense of justice” (Rawls, 1999, p. 321).

For Rawls, movements are extra-institutional pressure groups composed of individuals with shared minority status and commitments to the demands of justice. However, given this perspective, the presumption of reliable success in collective action without formal institutions' direct intervention is not a straightforward proposition. If, as I discussed in the previous section, institutions are necessary for successful collective action, then such minority-lead movements would have a very difficult time acting collectively. Arguably, such movements do not have a chance to serve the function of entering public discourse and pressuring the majority as a unified entity with a goal. On the

other hand, if extra-institutional pressure groups have reliable ways to solve their collective action problems, then the emphasis on correcting formal institutions to generate change needs serious qualification, a point I elaborate on shortly. In sum, either minority groups inherently lack tools necessary for generating meaningful change or the emphasis on formal institutions and respecting them in the ways Rawls requires is misplaced (for a similar argument see Young, 2012).

Neglecting the difficulties of collective action also leads to troublesome downstream effects, particularly considering the substantial sacrifices Rawls deems necessary for a movement's legitimacy. Even adhering to non-violence strategies as a collective is taxing and many veteran activists take it to be an unfeasible demand (Fithian, 2019). Mechanisms that would fully prevent deviations from non-violence practices in a mass-scale movement that includes individuals with diverse attitudes toward violence are simply lacking. Demanding such adherence to non-violence justifies mislabeling slight deviations as "riots," as happened in the summer of 2020 in response to the Black Lives Matter protests (ACLED, 2020; Delmas & Brownlee, 2021; Kling & Mitchell, 2021). In other words, turning a blind eye to the complexity of taking collective action plays into the hands of those who would prevent resistance and maintain the status quo (Celikates, 2014, 2016; Delmas, 2018; Pineda, 2021). Thus, many reject the unrealistic narrative of social movements that thrives on self-sacrifice and harmonious action with no conflict among members (Hooker, 2016; Livingston, 2020; Mantena & Terry, 2018; Pineda, 2021).

Rawls is not alone in dismissing Collective Action Problems for social movements. Moody-Adams (2022), for instance, expands the Rawlsian approach by focusing on collective identities that make progress by imagining new possibilities and reshaping public discourse. These collectives, however, lack any interesting structure or inner dynamic relevant to her account of change. She even resists the charge of any real intra- or inter-group conflict or contention by suggesting a unity in the moral goal of all constructive social movements, namely an expansion of the circle of "humane regard" (Moody-Adams, 2022).

Shared goals or commitments to justice do not translate to the same incentives and perfect harmony. Collectives, even those fighting for social justice, struggle with intra- and inter-group conflict (Combahee River Collective, 1986; Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020). "Elite Capture" is an example of such conflicts and their gravity, referring to the phenomenon of the more powerful members of a movement capturing attention and resources and using them to their advantage (Táiwò, 2022). Some also argue that conflict regarding interests and needs is a productive force for progress, not something to be altogether avoided (Young, 1990).

An alternative to the Rawlsian treatment of social movements is to shift the emphasis from formal institutions to informal practices that make collective action possible (Ostrom, 2009; Young, 2012). These practices are commonly held expectations we face in everyday encounters. They constitute social or moral norms, conventions, ideologies, culture, etc. that emerge over time from repeated interactions. By meeting these expectations, we avoid conflict, a bad reputation, or severed ties and gain the chance to enjoy the fruits of our cooperation with others.

Without any external authority, commonly held expectations generate behavioral resources we can use to cooperate and take collective action (Axelrod, 1984). Game theorists formulate these expectations as the equilibrium solutions to coordination games, which depict strategic interactions where individuals strive to harmonize their choices to attain a common objective (Bicchieri et al., 2018). These expectations attain equilibrium states because of their widespread acceptance, which eliminates any incentive for deviation. Over time, individuals contribute to the stability of these equilibrium states by employing interpersonal punishment strategies that increase the cost of deviation (Bicchieri, 2016; Ostrom, 2009; O'Connor, 2019; Skyrms, 2014).

What is progress? Common expectations can be unfair, unjust, or even oppressive, especially because of their vulnerability to group-based conditioning (O'Connor, 2019) or other structural effects (Heydari Fard, 2022). Behavioral scientists have shown that even without any communication or collusion among members, group-based labels, such as race or gender, generate discrimination, problematic norms, and expectations that benefit members of one group at the expense of the others (O'Connor, 2019). Groups also accumulate power, especially when their members secure strategic resources and use them to gain bargaining leverage (O'Connor, 2019), hoard opportunities (Tilly, 1998a, 1998b), and avoid accountability (Anderson, 2014). Hence, progress not only entails rectifying

problematic institutional practices through legal or policy changes but also, as is frequently highlighted in this literature, addressing biases in norms and expectations that stem from type-conditioning.

How do social movements make progress? Changing common expectations or norms is like moving from one equilibrium state to another. Thus, unless many people are on board simultaneously, everyone has good reasons to stick with the existing, even though problematic, equilibrium solutions. Thus, something like a protest can destabilize an equilibrium by signaling non-compliance by many, which reduces the support of the problematic solutions and disincentivizes compliance. Movements also introduce new solutions and impose a social cost on those who insist on endorsing the old ones (Anderson, 2014). This is how movements punctuate long periods of stability with rapid change processes (Bowles et al., 2021; Young, 2020). If lived experiences indicate that the new norms are better than the old ones, the resulting change is an instance of progress (Anderson, 2014).

It is worth noting that no ontological or methodological commitment is necessary for explaining the possibility of collective action without external authority. Norms, cultures, and ideologies have been theorized both as shared beliefs or attitudes among members of a collective (Bicchieri, 2016; Moody-Adams, 2022; Shelby, 2003; Skyrms, 2014) and as embodied, extended, historical, and material entities with somewhat independent ontologies (Escobar, 2017; Foucault, 1977; Haslanger, 2017; Young, 1980, 2012). However, the collectivist methodological assumptions bleed into the common interpretations of this approach to social movements.

Collectivist methodological assumptions are grounded in the observation that, sometimes, adding details about members does not improve the explanation of their group behavior (Kincaid, 1986). In fact, collective properties can be more stable and informative when members' behavior is highly organized, as in a military rank, or because members share their dominant incentives or goals. The problem is, however, that the stability of social movements, or their temporal continuity, does not depend on a strong organization or constant harmony among their participants' incentives. Some argue that movements "are not organizations, not even of a peculiar kind," but rather "networks of interaction between different actors which may either include formal organizations or not, depending on shifting circumstances" (Della Porta & Diani, 2020, p. 16). Assuming otherwise leads to three major shortcomings in collectivist interpretations of social movements.

First, collectivists fail to explain endogenous change in both the movements and the societies in which they are embedded. Dismissing the inner dynamics of groups leaves very few means to explain how change can happen from within. Second, they miss what is unique about movements by treating them as external pressure groups. Some use this treatment to argue that social movements are inadequate vehicles of change when external institutions can do better than movements.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to this argument, however, others emphasize the unique contribution of social movements by pointing to the limitations of institutional interventions. As an illustration, some argue that the #MeToo movement's success in reshaping tolerance for workplace sexual harassment far outweighs the impact of legal interventions of the 1970s (MacKinnon, 2019).

Finally, collectivist conceptions of social movements often assume minimal interaction both among groups themselves and among the informal practices that govern them (Heydari Fard, 2021). However, the interdependence of various social problems, including but not limited to the dynamics of gender, race, class, disability, etc., means that neither addressing nor understanding one without the others is possible (Haslanger, 2020; Young, 1988, 1990). This interdependence also highlights the challenge in finding alternative solutions. Solving interdependent problems—especially when situational information is required for individuals with very little in common—or moving towards a better state that accounts for all these interdependencies, is akin to navigating an unfamiliar "epistemic landscape" (Weisberg & Muldoon, 2009).

Various adjacent discussions establish that solving interdependent and complex problems collectively is possible, but it does not necessitate an organized group taking intentional action with a coherent plan (for example see Weisberg & Muldoon, 2009). On the contrary, conflicts, disagreements, and the freedom to explore options become essential attributes of a group with any chance of success in solving such problems. In the following section, I delve into this interdependence and its resulting complexity. But it is worth noting that dynamic structures of interdependence explain the distinction between a group grappling with conflict and a collective that harnesses the constructive

power of such tensions like a movement (Heydari Fard, 2021). The focus on interdependence also yields explanations that anticipate potential backlash (Faludi, 2009) and regression in response to social movements, as changes in one aspect can disrupt norms and expectations in others on which people's livelihoods depend. Finally, focusing on the structure of interdependence addresses concerns held by those who view interdependence as a reason to avoid disrupting the existing social order altogether (Gaus, 2021), as well as those who suggest that we might need to "give up" (Manne, 2018).

## 2.3 | The Complexity Approach

Arguably, collectivists are right that groups or collectives can exhibit greater stability than can individuals, thereby offering more robust causal explanatory potential. However, sometimes neither individuals nor collectives exhibit sufficient stability to establish an explanatory foundation. We particularly notice this instability when we seek to explain complex processes of change. For example, consider any meaningful transformation regarding persistent and complex issues like racial or gender inequalities. Such changes necessitate disrupting stability at various levels, encompassing not only individuals' incentives, habits, and attitudes, but also social norms and practices, as well as the corresponding laws and policies, that have developed around them and ensure their stability. Transformation in such cases requires coordination among many high and low impact actors and demands mechanisms that facilitate synchronous change at different levels. The best explanations of such transformations span various levels and, crucially, depend on interdependence within and between levels to capture their complexity (Bar-Yam, 2017). Examining the methodological and ontological commitments of such complexity is the focus of what I call the complexity approach.

Advocates of the complexity approach give precedence to empirical success in causal explanation to guide their methodological and ontological commitments. Consequently, they refrain from making a priori methodological assumptions about the appropriate level of explanation. Comfortable with the potential interdependence within and between these levels, they also embrace fluid boundaries between them and reject the necessity of a nested hierarchy that reduces every higher level description to lower levels. Moreover, they adopt an agnostic ontological stance concerning primary units of analysis that stems from both the considerable variations observed across different cases and the counterintuitive nature of such classifications.

A notable illustration of counterintuitive yet successful units of analysis in empirical research is the observation that movements "often consist not of (just) living breathing whole individuals but of groups, organizations, bundles of social ties, and social sites such as occupations and neighborhoods" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2005, p. 61). Should this proposition prove accurate, movements transcend the confines of being merely a collection of individuals with conflicting interests or a homogenous group with a unified objective. This kind of transcendence has become the focus of influential social scientific research that engages in discussion of intersectionality (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020; Walby, 2007), identity politics, political ontology (Escobar, 2017), and even practical guides for activism and direct action (Fithian, 2019; Maree Brown, 2017; Tsing, 2015). A parallel philosophical example that highlights the significance of moving beyond such dichotomies is the agent/structure binary, often discussed in the context of social change.

Among the advocates of collective explanation, those who focus on structures' role in shaping individual incentives insist that achieving meaningful progress necessitates structural change (Anderson, 2010; Cohen, 1997; Haslanger, 2015; O'Connor, 2019). Others advocate for changing individual attitudes with institutional intervention, for instance through implicit bias training (Brownstein et al., 2021; Zheng, 2018). The emphasis on interdependence between individual and collective properties in the complexity approach, however, provides a different picture.

Take, for instance, the impact of Rosa Parks' refusal to change her seat. On the one hand, collectivist frameworks would dismiss her contribution all together. Their emphasis on equilibrium solutions—as stable group-level properties—indicates that such actions would be punished and corrected without destabilizing racial norms. Thus,

advocating for such actions would be unreasonable and a distraction from the structures that form people's incentives. On the other hand, even though Parks' action did make a difference, no individualistic description—something about Parks' incentives, habits, or attitude—can explain the magnitude of her effect.

Parks' rebellion launched a series of reinforcing events that built momentum for the Civil Rights Movement. However, standing her ground in isolation would not have the same effect. In fact, it is implausible to think that she has been the only one who has ever refused to comply with racist expectations. The difference between Parks and others was her embeddedness in a well-connected network of activists and allies who (1) amplified the consequences of her resistance and (2) reduced the cost of her deviation from racist expectations (Polletta, 2002). Mounting protests is one of many ways that networks of interdependence can generate reinforcing feedback mechanisms that lead to endogenous change.

Networks of interdependence play a pivotal role in resolving collective action challenges. They facilitate the sharing of information, provide a platform for coordinating actions, manipulate mechanisms of accountability and social influence, nurture trust through repeated interactions, and engender feedback loops and iterative learning processes. In the context of social movements, these networks are strategically manipulated by agents to cultivate smaller communities, known as “counter politics” or identity groups, that foster novel communal dynamics and norms (Fraser, 2021). These groups and communities are far from homogenous and conflict-free, but they generate an environment in which experimental living fosters innovative strategies to tackle coordination and collective action hurdles (Anderson, 2014; Haslanger, 2017). Their internal networks enable members to replicate and develop effective strategies, while external networks offer comparative assessments of these tactics' success. By reshaping individuals' networks, smaller communities can shield members from societal mechanisms that enforce widely shared norms and expectations. Embedded within broader social networks, these communities can form coalitions, foster solidarity, and amplify messages that would otherwise remain unheard. Perceiving agents and structures as minimally interactive or independent entities disregards this reciprocal, dynamic, and intricate relationship between them.

What is progress? The interdependence of agents and structures both explains the emergence of problematic social order and identifies potential sites for improvement. Inequality, for instance, can stem from the actions of those in power who shape their interdependence networks to allow resources to flow freely within while remaining inaccessible to those outside. In other words, alongside biases in norms, laws, or policies, the structure of individuals' interaction networks significantly contributes to the preservation of unfair and unjust inequalities. In fact, norms are sometimes problematic because of the role they play in shaping such networks. Norms against intermarriage, exclusionary rules of etiquette, or segregation all perpetuate boundaries that maintain power for members of a group (Anderson, 2014; Cudd, 2005; Tilly, 1998a, 1998b). These boundaries also fragment networks of cooperation and generate “structural holes” that deprive others from support and resources needed to thrive or form alternative networks (Burt, 1992; Heydari Fard, 2022). Therefore, progress requires amending these network fragmentations, which can simply mean focusing on networks in addition to correcting problematic norms or unjust laws and practices. A stronger claim is that altering networks and rectifying their fragmentations are necessary for any sustainable and transformative form of progress.

How can social movements make progress? Movements destabilize equilibrium states by reorganizing positions and relations among members of a society (Diani & Mische, 2015, p. 3). Such reorganization can amend structural holes and fix fragmentation in interdependence networks. With new participants joining them, the movements' influence broadens by including their extended networks. Some of those within these extended networks might themselves become participants, which generates an amplifying mechanism for involvement. Moreover, because of this expansion, the nature of interaction networks, particularly their density and connections, undergoes alterations. Even those who choose not to participate find their connections reshaped, gaining exposure to previously inaccessible information, experiencing new forces of accountability, and potentially developing different interests in light of these new connections.

The complexity approach takes the distinctive feature of movements to be their ability to employ existing social networks to erect novel structures of interdependence that facilitate the bridging of “structural and cultural holes”



(Diani & Mische, 2015, p. 13). These structures serve as a foundation for enhanced organization and synchronized action across multiple levels. Successful movements involve participants from diverse backgrounds, extending to individuals with varying degrees of power and influence and facilitating synchronized action. However, movements do not resolve coordination challenges without generating conflict or by forming homogenous groups with unified objectives. Their sustained existence and temporal continuity arise from balancing between two important mechanisms common in complex and dynamic systems: (1) stabilizing mechanisms, such as interpersonal accountability that fosters concerns about reputation or inclusion, and (2) reinforcing mechanisms that amplify the growth in popularity of various strategies.

### 3 | CONCLUSION

Even those who agree on the transformative power of social movements diverge on mechanisms through which meaningful change is possible. This divergence results from different assumptions about proper explanations and their suitability for capturing movements' complexity. Attending to these assumptions is an important step toward resolving old puzzles about social movements. Identifying alternative frameworks that engage with this complexity head-on is another important step. The complexity approach is a promising but underexplored candidate.

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### ENDNOTE

- <sup>1</sup> That is the case irrespective of how progress is defined.
- <sup>2</sup> Conceptual continuity is another feature of social movements with philosophically interesting implications, for example in individuating the movements. However, to remain aligned with the current state of both the empirical and philosophical literature, I do not engage with conceptual continuity and the discussions about individuation in this paper.
- <sup>3</sup> For a similar approach see Nefsky (2019).
- <sup>4</sup> Sankaran (2020) and Bicchieri (2016) exemplify arguments in favor of institutional change despite their recognition of the role conventions and norms play to solve collective action problems. Even though they do not explicitly define social movements as “external pressure groups,” their explanatory assumptions limit them to a roughly similar view about movements.

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