

# Social Movement Theories

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover social movement theories, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Deprivation Theory
2. Political Opportunity Theory
3. Resource Mobilization Theory
4. Culture Theory
5. Mass-Society Theory
6. New Social Movement Theory

## 1. DEPRIVATION THEORY

Why do social movements arise? Why do people join them? Why do they arise in a specific context at specific times? There are various competing sociological theories that help to explain why social movements in general occur, as well as where and when they do.

**Deprivation theory** holds that social movements arise because people feel that they lack something, or are deprived of something. Under this theory, social movements are based on an inequality in society, and it's often **relative deprivation**. Similar to relative poverty, relative deprivation is the feeling of lack or deprivation relative to someone else or some group. Therefore, these movements are based on inequalities in money, power, opportunity, or prestige. You might feel that you lack the opportunities that another person has, so you want to organize a movement around that.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** In the Civil Rights Movement, for instance, people of color lacked rights and social acceptance, which induced a movement. During the women's suffrage movement, women lacked the right to vote, and currently, you see the 99% and 1% movement, a massive inequality that needs redress.

Some people are relatively deprived compared to others in society, which prompts them to point to structural inequalities in society.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### Deprivation Theory

An explanation for social movements that asserts that movements happen because people feel like they lack something.

## Relative Deprivation

Where a person or a group of people feel deprived of something relative to another person or group.

# 2. POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY THEORY

You may be thinking that inequalities of various kinds are a part of society, and happen all the time, so why isn't every inequality acted on? Why isn't this the case all the time? **Political opportunity theory** helps to explain why. Political opportunity theory asserts that movements will result in response to opportunities opened up by weaknesses in capitalist society.

Inequality exists, and capitalism perpetuates social inequality, yet there is no social movement until the economy takes a nosedive and unemployment is so high that the political and economic context is right for an attack on the system--for a movement to arise.

### IN CONTEXT

In the context of the 99% and 1% movement, certain people were able to take advantage of the financial crisis, causing unemployment to rise massively and exposing the financialized basis of the system, such that some are benefited and others aren't. Political opportunity theory holds that social movements will respond to these failings of capitalism, and will respond to the political economic context being favorable by critiquing the system when the system goes down or takes a downturn.

The ingredients--an inequality, a relative deprivation, and a political opportunity opened up by a downturn in Capitalism--provide an opportunity to critique the system and get a movement going.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Political Opportunity Theory

An explanation for social movements that asserts that movements happen as a reaction to the flaws of capitalism.

# 3. RESOURCE MOBILIZATION THEORY

Once a movement begins, what can you do to keep the movement going? The movement needs resources. **Resource mobilization theory** is a third take on social movement theory that emphasizes the importance of resources in the development and strength of social movements.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** If you're fed up and want to push for change, you won't be successful unless you have a lot of people with you and you have some media coverage of your demonstrations. Resources, in terms of time, money, and media attention, are critical to movement success.

If you have resources, then you're more likely to succeed in your agitations for social change. Conversely, this also explains why it can be more difficult for poor people's movements to succeed, because they lack the resources necessary to galvanize the movement.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Resource Mobilization Theory

An explanation for social movements that asserts that movements happen because of, and are benefited by, access to resources.

## 4. CULTURE THEORY

**Culture theory** emphasizes the importance of culture to mobilizing social movements, the importance of shared cultural symbolism in uniting people in social movement activism. People will rally around common symbols such that they can be more easily mobilized and relied on, for example, to get to the square to demonstrate at a particular time. Cultural resources can also be mobilized to gain justification for movement action.

### IN CONTEXT

After 9/11, images of the World Trade towers were used to justify the war. Currently, in Russia, there's a social movement seeking to oust the president. An all girl punk rock band wrote a song against him, and now that band and the images of the girls in the band are cultural resources that can be drawn upon to get people out into the streets in protest. The band has almost become a symbol of the movement.

Cultural theory emphasizes the importance of the cultural resources of shared symbolism in keeping movements sustained.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Culture Theory

An explanation for social movements that asserts that movement participants draw on cultural resources and symbolic representations to communicate the message of the movement.

## 5. MASS-SOCIETY THEORY

**Mass-society theory** holds that social isolation and alienation induce people to join movements. Society is full of lonely, isolated individuals, who are seeking social connections, purpose, and meaning. Participating in a social movement--making friends and social connections--can provide that meaning and the social connection that attenuates the loneliness that those isolated individuals may feel. Mass-society theory is another explanation for why people join social movements and why they occur--to combat isolation and loneliness in society by connection in group movement.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Mass-Society Theory

An explanation for social movements that asserts that movements attract people who are socially isolated and

## 6. NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY

**New social movement theory** emphasizes the distinctiveness of new social movement activism in a post-industrial era, from about 1980 through today. The fundamental conflict in society isn't capitalists versus laborers anymore. The class lines have blurred, and most people don't want to rock the boat and produce any huge major changes in capitalism. They might wish that society would be a little more equal and fair, but they don't want to eradicate the system.

Now, social movements are about new issues like the environment, eating local, gay rights, animal rights, and world peace. Therefore, these new social movements are called lifestyle movements, or movements that are based on identity. These are broad movements that are easy to be a part of--they don't ask much of their members, so people join them.

➦ **EXAMPLE** You can easily 'like' an environmental cause on Facebook and be considered part of the movement in some registers.



### BIG IDEA

It's rarely just one motivating factor that causes people to join a social movement--for example, it's solely deprivation, or culture, or mass society. It's likely that in any given movement, all of these motivations are present. People join for various reasons, and sometimes for a combination of reasons, so it's not exclusive.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### **New Social Movement Theory**

An explanation for social movements that asserts that movements now happen because of quality of life and identity issues.



### SUMMARY

Today you learned about the following social movement theories that help to explain why social movements in general occur: **deprivation theory, political opportunity theory, resource mobilization theory, culture theory, mass-society theory, and new social movement theory.**

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### **Culture Theory**

An explanation for social movements that asserts that movement participants draw on cultural resources and symbolic representations to communicate the message of the movement.

#### **Deprivation Theory**

An explanation for social movements that asserts that movements happen because people feel like they lack something.

**Mass-Society Theory**

An explanation for social movements that asserts that movements attract people who are socially isolated and gain a sense of purpose from movement participation.

**New Social Movement Theory**

An explanation for social movements that asserts that movements now happen because of quality of life and identity issues.

**Political Opportunity Theory**

An explanation for social movements that asserts that movements happen as a reaction to the flaws of capitalism.

**Relative Deprivation**

Where a person or a group of people feel deprived of something relative to another person or group.

**Resource Mobilization Theory**

An explanation for social movements that asserts that movements happen because of, and are benefited by, access to resources.