

Urban Movements

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Urban movements are social movements through which citizens attempt to achieve some control over their urban environment. The urban environment comprises the built environment, the social fabric of the city, and the local political process.

An alternative current term is "urban social movements". Pickvance (2003) suggested that the term "urban movements" is to be preferred because it is more straightforward, analogous to "environmental movement" instead of "environmental social movement".

The sociological study of urban movements emerged in the aftermath of May 1968. Previously, urban sociology had tended to focus on community and social integration, at the expense of neglecting the political economy of urban development and conflicts of interest. One of the first to set out to fill this gap was Manuel Castells. In "The Urban Question" (1972) he presented a model of the dynamics of the urban system in which there was one single mechanism for structural change. He called this mechanism "urban social movements". Around the same time, citizens in many cities around the world were mobilizing in response to problems in the urban environment, which helped generate interest in the topic; a number of sociologists drew inspiration from their personal experience as participants in these mobilizations.

The urban movement literature shows a wide range of problems that citizens have responded to with collective action. A large section can be categorized under the heading of "collective consumption": housing shortages, growing discrepancies between rents and wages, landlords' neglect of maintenance - even up to the point of abandonment - and insufficient healthcare and education. And in developing countries, shantytown dwellers face a lack of water supply, sewers and electricity. A second set of action-provoking problems is related to urban planning: displacement and destruction of beloved cityscapes. Finally, specific groups have mobilized around highly specific issues, such as squatters against anti-squatter policies, property-owners against proposed social housing and against property taxes, racist groups against migrants.

Urban movements tend to draw on a relatively stable set of familiar types of action. The action repertoires found in urban movements very much overlap with the action repertoires of other social movements. Some items, however, are specific for urban movements: the rent strike, squatting and developing alternative spatial plans.

Organizational patterns can be bottom-up or top-down. Bottom-up mobilization involves building networks of activists and occasional participants, the creation of committees, possibly formal organizations, newsletters, neighborhood centers. An example in which substantial bottom-up mobilization occurred was the 1970s Citizen Movement in Madrid. Top-down mobilization occurs when political parties build local organizations, such as in the case of the land squatter movement of Santiago de Chile from 1965-73 or when political groups try to take over or make use of a movement that started in a bottom-up fashion. This occurred in the later stages of the Madrid Citizen Movement (examples from Castells 1983). Top-down involvement of political groups or parties is often viewed as

detrimental because it can entail a transformation into state-oriented bureaucracy, and because it clashes with the prevalent ideal of self-management (Castells 1983).

Often, urban movements exhibited a capacity for transcending social borders, such as through cross-class mobilization. This has taken the shape of horizontal cooperation of participants from different class backgrounds (as in urban squatters' movements) or instead middle-class activists (such as students) helping poor people (such as immigrant workers). Some urban movements, however, have been restricted in terms of the participants' ethnicity (such as Black and Latino mobilizations in US cities in the 1960s and 1970s), class (for instance rent strikes) or age (the Italian Social Centers movement).

The relatively prominent role of women in urban movements - as far as social movements go that are not specific women's movements - has often been noted. An example is the 1922 tenant's protest in Veracruz, Mexico (Castells, 1983). One explanation for this phenomenon points to the special role of women in collective consumption.

Protest goals are often clear and measurable, such as preventing a particular planned transformation in the built environment, seeing to it that particular buildings get repaired instead of abandoned, getting a street closed to through-going traffic, preventing the eviction of a building, or achieving a rent reduction. In studies of urban movements we tend to find ample information on whether such goals were attained. The resulting picture shows a mix of failure and success; it is evident that urban movements can have clear effects. The clearest are the effects of activists' victories in planning conflicts. In several cities (such as Amsterdam), the map shows the traces of urban highway construction projects that were abandoned in mid-execution: a wide street, created as a stretch of urban highway after razing blocks left and right, stopped dead in a maze of ancient streets. Newly built houses or renovated buildings may be seen solidifying the protest movement's victory because the gap that they leave is only wide enough for a narrow street.

Beyond cancellation of individual construction projects we find wholesale transformations of urban planning, in a direction that more or less conforms to demands made by activists. An example is the influence that Castells (1983) ascribed to the "Madrid Citizens' movement. Urban movements often are pre-sentient of what later becomes accepted planning wisdom.

Ideally, claims about turns in urban history caused by protest are bolstered by an analysis of the decision-making process and by an attempt to sort out movement influence from other factors, such as financial constraints.

Protesters' victories may be partial: such as a cap put on a rent increase instead of succeeding in preventing it completely or being unable to prevent an eviction but instead securing re-housing. Also, there may be unintended effects, such as protests against eviction of squats leading to legalization. Some point to the risk that urban action can be self-defeating: improvements in low-income neighborhoods might attract gentrification, which forces the original inhabitants out of their neighborhood.

Some confusion exists as to whether urban movements should be seen as either instrumental movements or identity movements. The clarity in terms of goals that cases of urban protest often possess does not exist at the level of the movement. Movements do not need overarching goals - nor do they need a high level of organizational unification. Therefore, goals ascribed to urban movements tend to be somewhat arbitrary. For example, the same Dutch squatters' movement has been described by some as a "New Social Movement" or identity movement aiming to create a new way of life, and by others, equally justifiable, as an instrumental movement fighting for affordable housing.

Urban movement studies tend to move beyond recording and explaining victories and defeats in individual cases of urban action and conflict. A question that has commanded much attention is the contribution that urban movements might make to social change.

Castells, especially, has been involved in the search for a general theory. At first (for example in his 1972 book "The Urban Question") he elaborated the idea that urban movements had a latent function in the class struggle. He stated that urban movements could only be significant for social change if they linked up with organizations involved in the class struggle in the sphere of production.

In a later attempt, Castells (1983) stated that the local focus of urban movements precludes transformation of production, communication and government; the kind of social change that urban movements would be capable of producing is resistance to domination or in other words, changing the "urban meaning", resulting in "reactive utopias". Urban movements could achieve their maximum potential for social change (Castells reserved the title of urban *social* movement for this condition) when they were multi-issue, pursuing all of the following three goals. First, realizing collective consumption demands (such as those related to social housing) within a framework of promoting the city as a use value against commodification. Second: establishing and strengthening an autonomous cultural identity and promoting communication instead of "programmed one-way information flows". And third: territorially based self-management. Other criteria were explicit consciousness that active groups were part of a wider social movement, solidarity with other parts of the movement, expression of movement themes in the media, and - without giving up autonomy - the maintenance of links with professionals and political parties. Castells' model seems most fruitful when treated as an ideal type, i.e. as a conceptual tool for discussing similarities and differences between urban movements. Since the model does not include contextual variables and scarcely any action variables, not too much explanatory value is to be expected.

Rise, fall and transformation of urban movements have been subject to analysis as well. In his early writings, Castells suggested that mobilization can be explained by the intensity of urban problems or the contradictions behind these. This stimulated other urban sociologists to identify contextual factors that play a role in mobilization, such as the extent to which citizens find themselves in a similar state of deprivation, whether or not it is a zero-sum conflict (one neighborhoods' gain is the other neighborhood's loss) and cleavages between tenants and owners or between those who are eligible for re-housing after renewal and those who are not. Insights from the general social movement literature, especially the "political opportunity structure" approach, apply here too: citizens mobilize in response to widening opportunities as cleavages within elites become manifest and new allies appear on the scene. Another relevant contextual variable is the extent to which urban managers succeed in redefining social issues as either individual or technical problems. Repression is an important factor everywhere, although most dramatically in developing countries where activists risk being murdered when they move against powerful interests (Corr 1999). Besides context, analyses of mobilization need to consider the strategies employed in the mobilization of resources such as influential sympathizers. The skills activists display in framing, i.e. verbalizing urban problems, identifying someone to blame and proposing a solution are important too.

Movements tend to have a life cycle; institutionalization (i.e. being channeled into a stable pattern based on formalized rules and laws) and cooptation (activists start performing some task at the request of the government) are often seen as the beginning of the end. It is an open question, however, whether institutionalization is inevitable. The introduction of conventional interaction such as consultation and negotiation does not imply that disruptive tactics necessarily disappear from the movement's action repertoire. Especially when disruptive tactics are part of the movement's identity (example: for a squatters' movement squatting is means and end at the same time) and when repression is moderate they may remain part of the repertoire. Institutionalization and cooptation may cancel out the impulse toward change, but it may also be a way to secure the results of a movements' victory.

An emergent area of inquiry concerns the effect of structural regime change on urban movements. Post-Fordist theory suggests that local governments increasingly feel contradictory pressures to decrease welfare bureaucracy and spending and at the same time to alleviate poverty. This results in a greater need to co-opt urban movement groups for example as managers of self-help programs. Issues that prompt research and debate are whether activists should expect some influence in return for being co-opted, because they perform an essential job, and if cooptation of some movement groups means that new opportunities for radical groups emerge.

Some recent thinking de-emphasizes the *local* focus of urban movements (Hamel et al. 2000). Indeed we do find clear cases of urban movements that are both local and national or supra-national, such as the youth movement that is involved in the creation of social centers, “Critical Mass” and “Reclaim the Streets”. But more generally, the fact that urban mobilizations have appeared in at least nationwide wave patterns shows that influences beyond the local are relevant.

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