Collective Behaviour and Social Movements

General Categories and Theories
man in tiananmen square 1989
Buddhist monk protest South Vietnamese governments prohibition of Buddhists religious practices 1963
Collective Behaviour

• **Defined**: Voluntary, often spontaneous activity that is engaged in by a large number of people and typically violates dominant group norms and values

• Often contrasted to organizational behaviour

• **Examples**: panics, crowds, fashion, fads, mobs, celebrations, riots
Conditions for Collective Behaviour

• **Collectivity**: a relatively large number of people who mutually transcend, bypass, or subvert established institutional patterns and structures

• **Conditions:**
  – Timing
  – Breakdown in social control mechanism
  – Structural strains and factors that increase likelihood of a type of response, such as the existence of inequalities
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Dynamics of Collective Behaviour

- Acting outside of established norms
- Presence of immediate communication
- Why collectively and not individually?
  - Strength in numbers
  - Presence of leaders

Theorists differ in whether collective behaviour is seen as representing rational or irrational behaviour
Types of Crowd Behaviour

Casual and Conventional

Causal: large; happen to be in one place at one time

Conventional: those who come together for a scheduled event

Expressive and Acting Crowds

Expressive: Come together to express a strong emotions
Acting: intense and violent

Mob: a highly emotional crowd whose members are violent and organized against a person, group or places

Riot: Violent crowds with no apparent target

Panic: Mass reactions to a real or perceived threat
Theories of Crowd Behaviour

• Contagion Theory
• Social unrest and circular reaction
• Convergence Theory
• Emergent Norm Theory
Contagion Theory

• Gustave Le Bon (1841-1931)
• People feel vulnerable and, with anonymity, the crowd transforms people from being rational to being irrational and a common mind is created
• One will do things in a crowd that one would never deem appropriate to do on their own
• The lowest common denominator rules.
Convergence theory

• Crowd behavior reflects the beliefs and intentions that individuals already share before they join a crowd.

• People bring shared emotions, goals, and beliefs to crowd behaviour. These shared elements bring people together.

• This theory might be applied to lynch mobs and environmental protests
Emergent Norm Theory

People are not sure how to behave when they begin to interact in collective behavior. As they discuss their potential behavior, norms governing their behavior emerge, and social order and rationality then guide their behavior.

• The vitality of social norms is central in shaping crowd behaviour

• Crowd behaviour is not purely random and irrational

• Example: the Los Angeles riots of 1992 purposively targeted Korean businesses

• Meaning and norms are redefined by the crowd.

• Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian (1957)
Mass Behaviour

**Defined:**
- Collective behaviour that takes place when people respond to the same event in much the same way (e.g., a rock concert) even though they may be geographically separated.

**Types:**
- Rumour
- Gossip
- Mass hysteria
- Public opinion
- Fashions
- Fads
- Propaganda
Mass Behaviour

**Fads**
- Temporary but widely copied activity enthusiastically followed by large numbers of people. Short term.

**Fashions**
- Currently valued style of behaviour, thinking or appearance
- Pierre Bourdieu believes fashion is one-way individuals can express their class differences
Crowds and Power (1984)  
Nobel Peace Prize

- Open crowds
  - Seek growth
  - No boundaries
  - Desire new members
  - Dissipate when the collecting issue is absent

- Closed crowds
  - Limits on membership
  - Seek permanence
  - Have requirements for membership
Social Movements

• **Defined**: an organized group that acts consciously to promote or resist change through collective action

• **Elements**:
  – More likely in democracies
  – Help excluded groups have a voice in political processes
  – Rely on volunteers
Types of Social Movements

- Reform
- Revolutionary
- Religious
- Alternative
- Resistance
Reform Movements

- Movements that seek to improve society
- Work within existing structures
- Work to change public policy
- Examples: labour movements, animal rights
- MADD Mothers Against Drunk Driving
  [http://www.madd.org/activism/](http://www.madd.org/activism/)
Revolutionary Movements

• Hope to bring about a total change in societal organization and power structure

• French (1789), American (1779), or Russian Revolutions (1917)

• Terrorism—calculated unlawful use of physical force or threats of violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, organization, or individual for the purpose of gaining some political, religious, economic or social objective
Religious Movements

• Inner change focus

• **Liberation Theology**: stresses the role of political action and worked toward the goal of political liberation from poverty and oppression.

• The **Social Gospel** movement was a prominent Protestant movement in the late 19th-20th century that attempted to apply Christian principles to social problems. The Salvation Army is an example.
Alternative Movements

• To seek limited change in some aspects of people’s lives or behaviours

• Example:
  – The Women’s Christian Temperance Union to prevent the use of alcohol, which was also a drive to keep men at home and supporting their families

  – Veganism and organic food movements

  – Participa...
Resistance Movements

• Seek to prevent change

• Example: the Pro Life Movement

• Anti-immigration movements
Stages in Social Movements

• *Preliminary stage* - wide spread unrest, becoming aware of a problem
• *Coalescence stage* – getting organized to publicize a problem
• *Institutionalization stage* – organizational structure develops.
New Social Movement

• Theme: scholars look at a diverse array of collective actions and the manner in which these actions are based on politics, ideology, and culture

• Elements:
  – Personal identity, race, class, gender and sexuality
  – Examples—gender pronoun use movements, trans-sexuality movement
New Social Movement

– **Ecofeminism**— feminists that are concerned with the environment and believe that environmental neglect and abuse is implicit in the patriarchal capitalist business model.

– **Environmental racism**— the belief that a disproportionate number of hazardous facilities are placed in low-income areas populated primarily by people of colour.
Questions

• What factors can influence crowd behaviour?

• How can crowd behaviour be interpreted as incipient expressions of desires for social change?

• What does Smelser’s “structural strain” explain about collective behaviour?