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Chapter 20

Theories of Ethnic Identity Movements

Though there are some aspects of ethnic identity movements (movements for reform related to
the experiences of Native Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and White ethnic groups) that
are distinct from other sorts of American reform movements, reform movements in general have
some broad similarities. These similarities lead movement researchers to ask three key questions
about most movements they study: why do these movements form and who takes part in them,
what do they do, and what enables them to have an impact. There are no sure answers to any of
these questions; instead, there are different theories that each seek to explain movements.

**[A] When Do Ethnic Identity Movements Form?**

Most analysts of reform movements argue that movements emerge when there is some external
factor that spurs mobilization among a population. This external factor may be a change in the
social or political environment, or it may be a change in the opportunities or resources available
to a group. One of the classic theorists of reform movements, Neil Smelser, lays out a model in
his 1963 text *Theory of Collective Behavior* that discusses the stages in the emergence of reform
movements. In Smelser's model, the potential movement first experiences something called
structural conduciveness, which means that there is some kind of general social condition that
allows the movement to be built. Second, there is a strain, or a circumstance that a group of
people find to be annoying or difficult. Third, this group develops a generalized belief, or an
agreement that there is a real threat worth responding to. Finally, the group mobilizes and
becomes a reform movement.

It is easy to see how Smelser's model might apply to ethnic identity movements. Let us take the Latino movement as an example. According to Smelser—who, incidentally, was writing just as ethnic identity movements, the Civil Rights Movement, and other movements of the 1960s were getting off the ground—the first important element of the Latino movement would be the general environment of discrimination and exclusion that Latinos experienced in the United States, even Latinos who were long-standing American citizens. Though this condition had existed for many years, the strain of new immigrants coming from Central and South America after the 1965 liberalization of American immigration law made Latinos feel that they had to respond in some way. At the same time, the increasing numbers of Latinos entering higher education in this period allowed for the development of a Latino identity and a consciousness as an oppressed people. These students mobilized and formed the Latino and Chicano (Mexican American) identity movements.

Smelser does not offer the only model of reform movement emergence. More recent scholars have emphasized the role of resources and opportunities in allowing movements to emerge. These models suggest that there are always grievances, or circumstances of hardship or harm that serve as justifications for complaints. However, resources or political opportunities enable these grievances to turn into reform movements. The resource mobilization approach argues that it is resources, particularly resources in terms of time, money, and skill that enable grievances to turn into movements. The resource mobilization approach would thus suggest that ethnic identity movements emerged when funding and other resources became available to ethnic groups. In contrast, other scholars focus on the availability of political opportunities, such as changes in the balance of power in the government or the presence of sympathetic governmental officials that allow an opening for movement activity. This approach argues that when the

political structure is arranged in a fashion that is favorable to ethnic identity movements, such movements will develop.

## [B] Precipitating Factors

The models of movement formation outlined above tell us something about how movements emerge, but they do not suggest much about what might happen in the time preceding movement formation to spur the development of a movement. There are a variety of factors that can operate to spur the development of a movement beyond the availability of resources or favorable political opportunities.

Perhaps the most obvious precipitating factor is change in the social or political structure. Such change can be change that provide new political opportunities, but it can also be change that lead to the development of what Smelser called a suddenly imposed grievance. In other words, new conditions can arise that lead a group to see a problem where one did not previously exist. An example of such a situation might be the increased racial profiling and hate crimes that Arab and South Asian Americans experienced in the wake of the attacks on September 11, 2001. While Arab and South Asian Americans had experienced some stereotyping and hate crimes prior to 2001, the massive increase in suspicions, government harassment, and other disruptions led to the formation of groups that aimed to combat this discrimination and ensure equal treatment for Arabs and South Asians.

In other cases, the grievances that groups experience are not new, but group members come to see them in a new way. This may occur due to the experience of relative deprivation or because of the experience of a moral shock. Relative deprivation occurs when a group realizes that it is disadvantaged relative to another group with which it compares itself. For instance, Asian Americans in the pre-1960s period may have known that they were not treated as full

equals to White Americans because of factors like immigration and citizenship restrictions, but their everyday lives may have been similar to those of their neighbors. Only when Asian Americans started attending college at higher rates and coming into contact with White Americans who had access to greater opportunities did their relative deprivation in terms of employment opportunities, presence in the curriculum, and political representation become fully apparent, thus spurring the development of the Asian American Movement. Moral shock, in contrast, occurs when an individual experiences a deeply emotional stimulus that causes them to realize that the world is not exactly as they had assumed, particularly a stimulus that causes them to recognize conflicts between reality and their personal values and morals. News coverage of the conditions of African Americans in the U.S. South and of the liberation of Nazi concentration camps at the end of World War II are both examples of moral shocks that convinced some Americans of the importance of mobilizing around issues of ethnic identity and equality.

A final important factor in the emergence of ethnic identity movements is the development of collective identity. Many of the groups that we now see as coherent ethnic groups had not previously seen themselves in this way. For instance, Native Americans are organized into individual tribal groups such as the Cherokee, the Oneida, the Sioux, and the Hopi. At prior points in history, some Native American groups would have been quite hostile toward each other, even engaging in armed conflicts. It took the development of a collective identity to bring these groups together as Native Americans. Only after this point could a Native American Movement emerge. Yen Le Espiritu, in writing about a similar dynamic among Asian Americans, has called this sort of ethnic identity "panethnicity."

**[B] Who Participates and Why**

When an ethnic identity movement forms, not all individuals take part in it. It is thus important to be able to explain why some individuals join reform movements and others do not. As noted above, one important factor in the emergence of ethnic identity movements is collective identity. The importance of collective identity is not just in enabling the development of a movement—it is also in spurring individuals who hold that identity to join it. Individuals who feel that they have something in common with others who are part of a movement are more likely to feel that their participation is valuable. Of course, not everyone holding a particular collective identity joins the relevant movement. So what factors influence which individuals holding that identity join and which do not?

Scholars of collective behavior have long noted that reform movements are subject to something called a "free rider problem." What this means is that if an ethnic identity movement makes changes in the social or political environment, all members of that ethnic group benefit, even those who did not participate in the movement. Those who did not participate thereby become free riders, riding along on the effort of others. In this situation, it would seem that there is not much incentive for any particular individual to participate in a movement since they will get the benefits anyway. If one takes this perspective, it might be a surprise that anyone is willing to participate in a movement at all. However, there is an answer to this dilemma. Movements can provide what is known as "selective incentives," or incentives for participation that you can only get if you actually do participate in a movement. The exact nature of selective incentives can vary, ranging from the good reputation participants get to the social benefits of spending time with like-minded people, from material benefits from membership to ostracism of those who choose not to participate. Selective incentives can also include psychological benefits for participation.

Psychological explanations are not limited to those who contend that participating in reform movements makes individuals feel better about themselves. Smelser argued that individuals who participate in social movements are psychologically or socially predisposed to choosing activism as a way to resolve their problems rather than focusing on the more "normal" routes of institutionalized politics. He suggested that it is the absence of strong social controls (such as legal penalties or social ostracism) that allows individuals to take part in reform movements, and that shoring up these social controls and convincing individuals to return to institutionalized politics would limit involvement in reform movements. However, researchers have not generally found any evidence that movement participants are significantly different in psychological terms than movement non-participants.

There are two ways in which movement participants do tend to differ significantly from movement non-participants, and these are biographical availability and social networks. What biographical availability means is that some people are in life situations that enable them to participate in movements, while others are tied down by family or work responsibilities that give them little time or flexibility for participating in activism. Studies of many reform movements have shown that activists are more likely to be young, unmarried, and childless adults who are full-time students without significant employment responsibilities and less likely to be middle-aged adults, married, parents, or employed full-time. Social networks are another difference between those who become involved in reform movements and those who do not. Those who become involved tend to be those who have pre-existing social ties to others who are already involved in the movement, while those who do not know anyone who is involved are much less likely to take part. The biographical availability and social network arguments tell us something about why ethnic identity movements have been so often centered around colleges and

universities—there, movements can find large groups of biographically available students who already know one another.

**[A] What Do Ethnic Identity Movements Do?**

All movements have to define the set of goals that they work for. The goals of ethnic identity movements are somewhat different from the goals of many reform movements that preceded them. While ethnic identity movements do care deeply about political access and economic equality, much as the labor movement did, ethnic identity movements are also concerned with issues around culture and lifestyle, such as resisting assimilation and learning about group history. This difference means that ethnic identity movements can be classified as New Social Movements, a term that refers to movements in the post-1960s era that are concerned with identities, culture, and ideology along with politics.

Movements also have to make choices about what actions to take as they attempt to achieve their goals. These actions can be classified in two categories: strategy and tactics. Strategy refers to the long-term plans movements create as they aim to achieve their goals, while tactics refer to the individual actions reform movements can choose to engage in. Each movement has its own unique strategy, but movements draw on a shared repertoire of tactics, only occasionally engaging in the tactical innovation necessary to develop something new. Examples of tactics used by ethnic identity movements include marches, demonstrations, boycotts, violent conflict, building occupations, and petition campaigns.

One important element of strategy that has been common among different ethnic identity movements is the development of panethnic collective identity, or ethnic identities that cross borders that traditionally created distinct ethnic groups. For instance, when Korean Americans and Japanese Americans come to see one another and to identify as Asian Americans, a

panethnic collective identity has formed. This process is known as ethnogenesis. Ethnic identity movements not only depend on the existence of ethnic collective identity to help mobilize participants, they also actively work to expand and intensify the collective identity that will bring group members together. They do this through a process known as social construction, whereby a group invents identities that did not previously exist. In the Native American movement, activists worked to create a common Native American identity through the deployment of symbols and rules that can apply equally to members of all the different tribes. For instance, activists might work to change the rules around the blood quantum (the degree of Native American ancestry one might need to demonstrate in order to be considered a Native American) so that more or fewer individuals qualify; or by highlighting particular cultural objects, practices, or symbols such as fry bread or the Pow Wow in an attempt to build a common cultural core. Movements that work to develop panethnic collective identity tend to work to increase the conspicuousness of that identity for individuals. Collective identity can also serve to constrain other tactical or strategic choices that movements make. For instance, if a group develops a collective identity built in part on a shared commitment to non-violence, that group will not be able to choose violent tactics and still retain its legitimacy.

**[B] Ethnic Studies and Identity Movements**

As noted above, many ethnic identity movements have been primarily centered around colleges and universities and have drawn a significant portion of their membership from among college students. It is not surprising, then, that ethnic identity movements have focused some of their strategic energy on colleges and universities. One strand of such efforts has focused on increasing access and equality within the organizations of higher education. For instance, efforts to increase affirmative action, recruitment, and scholarships for members of ethnic groups fit into

this category. At the same time, ethnic identity movements have been involved in the establishment of the fields of academic inquiry now known as ethnic studies. Ethnic studies is a set of interdisciplinary areas of study that are focused on the study of particular ethnic groups or ethnic identity more generally; ethnic studies tends to take the position that each ethnic group has a distinct culture and tradition that requires the development of culturally relevant forms of academic inquiry. Besides Black/African American studies, ethnic studies programs may include those in Asian American studies, Chicano/Latino studies, Native American studies, Irish studies, Italian American studies, and Jewish studies, among others.

These new fields of study emerged not just as areas of academic inquiry, but as political acts often closely identified with the ethnic identity movements from which they came. Ethnic identity activists realized that the curricula at their colleges and universities as well as at their grade schools did not pay very much attention to the history, literature, and social experiences of non-white and even certain white ethnic groups. They therefore sought to develop this knowledge themselves as part of their long-term movement strategy. As they developed this knowledge, they worked to see it included in the curricula of colleges and universities.

Scholars who study the connections between knowledge and reform movements have various explanations for how this process works. Some argue that new areas of study emerge when established scholars see the need for new areas of inquiry and use their professional reputations to make a case for the new area of study. Some Jewish American scholars have done this, establishing their reputations in other areas of research and then only later in life turning to research on questions of Jewish American identity. Other scholars argue that new knowledge emerges through what Antonio Gramsci, the Italian revolutionary and social theorist, called "organic intellectuals," in other words intellectuals who remain rooted in and connected to their

communities of origin but are able to work within the intellectual sphere. Organic intellectuals can be seen at work in the development of Asian American studies and Chicano/Latino studies, as when undergraduate and graduate students of Asian American or Chicano/Latino descent on the West Coast began to do research and develop courses related to their ethnic identity in the absence of any established intellectuals with the knowledge, expertise, or willingness to do so.

## [B] Framing

A final important aspect of what movements do is called framing. Framing refers to the development of ideologies, beliefs, and messages about a movement or its situation that are used to construct meaning for participants, opponents, and observers. Movements construct and utilize three primary types of frames: diagnostic frames, which explain what a problem is and where it comes from; prognostic frames, which lay out a proposed solution for the problem; and motivational frames, which work to convince current or potential movement participants to get involved or to intensify their involvement with a movement. Framing requires continual strategic work on the part of movements—they must be sure their frames resonate with the ideas and experiences of their members, that frames remain significant and important to members, that frames remain current and up-to-date, and that frames are having the intended effects.

The framing activities of ethnic identity movements have included the development of new language to refer to the collective identities the movements represent as well as the movements themselves. For instance, Asian American ethnic groups have adopted the panethnic Asian American ethnic label in place of earlier terms that have more racist histories, such as "Mogoloid" or "Oriental," while Native Americans developed the "Red Power" slogan. Framing activities have also included motivational frames developed to convince individuals that affiliating with an ethnic identity and an ethnic identity movement is important and worthwhile;

these have included campaigns to change the racial and ethnic identity options on the United States Census and to convince multiracial individuals to identify their Asian or Native American ethnic heritage once the 2000 Census allowed for multiracial identification. Similarly, white ethnic groups have framed whiteness as devoid of culture to encourage white individuals to identify with a specific ethnic ancestry.

As noted above, framing is used to identify problems and suggest solutions. Ethnic identity movements use frames that do both of these tasks. For instance, Chicano activists have developed frames to highlight the historical presence of Chicanos in the United States and thereby demonstrate that Chicanos deserve fully equal citizenship. Asian American activists have pointed to data that shows that some Asian groups lag behind in comparison with other Asians' and whites' educational and economic outcomes and that therefore excluding Asian Americans from affirmative action and other compensatory programs is unfair. One particularly noteworthy aspect of framing as used by ethnic identity movements is that movements often copy one another's frames or develop jointly useful frames, as in the example of "Black Power," which has been used by a variety of ethnic identity movements.

Framing is also used to combat images of ethnic groups that are prevalent in the broader culture. For instance, Italian Americans have worked to combat images from *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos* that depict Italians as part of organized crime, and Sikhs (who are often assumed to be Muslim Arabs because of the fact that observant Sikh men wear turbans) have worked to demonstrate that they are not terrorists. One frame that many groups use in combating negative stereotypes is the argument that the media has learned to stop stereotyping and portraying negatively a vast array of other groups—but of course, since all sorts of ethnic identity

movements use this frame, we can see that continued stereotyping and negative portrayals are quite common.

**[A] The Impacts of Ethnic Identity Movements**

The reason why movements form is because they want to change something about culture, society, or the political structure. Very few movements are able to achieve everything they set out to do, while some do not achieve anything at all. Most movements do have some sort of an impact, but this impact falls far short of their original goals. For instance, the Native American movement has a large number of goals, including goals ranging from renegotiating treaties between the United States government and tribal governments to the protection of Native American cultural and religious freedom. Since the emergence of the Native American movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the movement has made great strides in protecting the cultural and religious freedom of Native Americans by abolishing a system of boarding schools that had been designed to assimilate Native American youth to white culture. However, the United States government has not been willing to revisit the treaty process or return to compliance with treaties it made in the past.

Scholars of movements are left with a difficult question when looking at the life course of a movement such as the Native American movement—was it a success or was it a failure? One classical scholar of social movements, William Gamson, argued in his book *The Strategy of Social Movements* that movements were only successes if they achieved all of the goals they set out for themselves. It is not surprising, then, that when Gamson studied a wide variety of movements across the United States, he found that having small goals was an indicator of future success. Later scholars of movements revised this perspective to argue instead that movements could have successes even if they did not meet all of their original goals. For instance, the

bargaining perspective suggests that there are six different levels of success a movement can have, ranging from access (is the movement able to get its voice heard by political decision makers) to structural (does the movement achieve the transformative goals it set out at the beginning).

More recently, some people who study movements have begun to argue that success is not a good way to look at what movements achieve. Edwin Amenta has argued that instead of just considering complete success, we should look at all of the impacts that movements have. These impacts may be those that the movement desired and sought out, they may be unintended consequences of movement activism, or they may even be the opposite of what the movement sought. For instance, the Italian American movement urged the United States government to make Columbus Day a national holiday and Italian Americans celebrate their ethnic identity on that day. The public celebration of Columbus Day, however, has led to the emergence of opposition from Native Americans who point to the slaughter of Native Americans during the colonial period as reason to abolish Columbus Day observations.

**[B] What Makes Movement Impacts Possible?**

The most important question about movement impacts is what factors, whether internal to the movement itself or part of the external environment in which the movement operates, allow movements to have impacts. As with all of the other questions about movements discussed above, there are a variety of different answers to this question. Some scholars argue that the most important factors are the quality of the membership itself—the size, unity, worthiness, and commitment of the members. Others argue that the resources available to a movement make the biggest difference, in other words that movements with the most money, time, and other resources will have the largest impact. Scholars concerned with the availability of political

opportunities argue that when the political system is primed for a particular movement or when governmental officials are sympathetic, then a movement will best be able to have an impact.

A more nuanced argument can be found among scholars who use the political mediation perspective. This perspective argues that movements are able to have the most significant impact when the strategies and tactics that they choose are aligned with the political context they face. Where the political environment is favorable to the goals of a movement and when governmental officials are supportive, that movement will be able to have an impact when it chooses less assertive tactics like petition drives and lobbying. As mentioned earlier, many ethnic identity groups worked to create changes in the way that the Census collects data on race, including the adoption of the multiracial option and the development of a separate category for Pacific Islander Americans. These changes were adopted by the Census for the year 2000 after a campaign of lobbying by ethnic identity movements. Where the political environment is less favorable, movements need to use more assertive tactics like building occupations or boycotts that disrupt daily life and draw public attention. For instance, African American, Latino, Asian American, and Native American students at San Francisco State College engaged in a Third World Liberation Strike in a series of demonstrations during the 1968-1969 school year to demand the establishment of ethnic studies programs. Before 1968, they had tried other tactics, but they had not met with much success. After the strike, San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University) gradually established a College of Ethnic Studies that now offers majors in Africana studies, American Indian studies, Asian American studies, and Raza (Latino/Chicano/Caribbean American) studies, as well as programs on general ethnic and racial studies and Arab studies.

[B] The End of Ethnic Identity Movements

Movements start out thinking that they are aiming to achieve a particular set of goals and that when they achieve those goals they will be finished. But since we have seen that most movements do not achieve all of their goals, it is clear that movements must end in other ways besides success. Most movements, in fact, end either through institutionalization or death. Institutionalization refers to when a movement ends because it becomes part of the mainstream political sphere and no longer needs to engage in the sort of outsider politics that movements use. For instance, Irish Americans used to be an outsider group and eventually found a place in mainstream politics. Similarly, some groups representing Chinese or Japanese Americans emerged as movement organizations aiming to ensure full citizenship for their ethnic communities, but today serve mostly to encourage ethnic business development. When movements become institutionalized, they are generally transformed from groups of volunteer activists into not-for-profit or political organizations with paid and professional staff who are committed to the goals of the organization but who are also committed to the work of maintaining the organization and finding new areas of activism to explore. For instance, the ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE  was founded in 1913 to fight anti-Semitism and discrimination against Jews, but is now involved in campaigns against a wide variety of discrimination and intolerance involving various racial, ethnic, and religious groups as well as gay and lesbian people.

Death, in contrast, is when a movement ends simply by disappearing. Movements generally die because their members are no longer interested in participating. Members lose interest for a variety of reasons. They may no longer be biographically available as they grow older and their life situations change, they may find other movements dealing with issues they now find more important, their friends may leave the movement and thus reduce the availability

of selective incentives, they may be subject to significant repression, or the movement may have achieved enough of its goals to satisfy them. While there are a variety of individual movement organizations that are part of various ethnic identity movements which have experienced one of these fates, such as the organizations that participated in the Third World Liberation Strike at San Francisco State College, ethnic identity movements as a whole, as of yet, have not experienced movement death. They are still actively engaged in their campaigns, making some progress, but not yet achieving all their goals. A key element of their continued vitality is that each generation brings new individuals who are part of the ethnic group and can be recruited to activism.

It is important to note that while ethnic identity movements have been subject to repression, the degree of repression that they have faced has generally been more limited than that faced by many other reform movements. Ethnic identity movements' primary focus on culture and identity has proven less threatening to political and social structures than other movements' focus on massive social and political change. The exception to this statement is the Native American movement, which has faced criminalization and violent repression on numerous occasions. While members of other ethnic identity movements have been jailed and while individual demonstrations have ended with a violent police response, movement activists have generally been able to continue their activities.

## [A] Conclusion

Ethnic identity movements are just one type of New Social Movement. Like other New Social Movements, ethnic identity movements are concerned as much with culture, identity, and ideology as they are with particular political or social structural changes. These concerns with culture, identity, and ideology have several important consequences. First, ethnic identity movements draw on collective identity to mobilize members while at the same time developing

collective identity as a strategic choice. Second, the tactics that ethnic identity movements use tend to include knowledge development as well as the use of identity-based motivational framing. Third, ethnic identity movements continue to renew themselves through recruitment of the next generation and therefore continue to be vital movements. Finally, with the exception of the Native American movement, ethnic identity movements have often escaped the worst aspects of repression.

Ethnic identity movements have much in common with other reform movements that are not New Social Movements as well. The participants in ethnic identity movements tend to be those who are biographically available, and they are recruited into participation through social networks, relative deprivation, moral shocks, shared collective identity, and selective incentives. Ethnic identity movements themselves emerge due to new grievances or the availability of resources or political opportunities that allow them to act on pre-existing grievances. Movements make strategic and tactical choices related to the goals they have, and the strategic and tactical choices they make play an important role in shaping the degree to which they are able to have an impact. Like other movements, ethnic identity movements are rarely able to achieve everything they set out to do. But the United States is a very different place than it would have been without the activism of ethnic identity movements.

*See also* BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT; RED POWER MOVEMENT; U.S. CENSUS RECOGNIZES MULTIRACIAL CATEGORY; WHITE ETHNIC IDENTITY MOVEMENTS OF THE 1970S.

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