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Unrest or Social Movement? Some Conceptual Clarifications

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When in 1980 and 1981 protesters in Zurich, Amsterdam, Berlin and many other cities clashed with the police and disturbed these cities' urban routines, contemporary commentators were surprised by the intensity of the conflicts, by the number of participants and by the level of violence they often involved. Politicians, journalists and social scientists alike have been quick to label the wave of protest that emerged in several European countries, and most forcefully in the Netherlands, Switzerland and Germany, as a 'youth movement',[1] 'youth protest',[2] 'youth unrest',[3] 'youth rebellion'[4] or 'youth revolt'.[5] Usually these terms were not defined, and often authors used them interchangeably, yet always with the prefix 'youth'. Others have precisely questioned this prefix, arguing that the issues addressed in the protest were not necessarily youth-specific, and that a significant number of the participants were too old to be labelled as youth.[6]

In this chapter I would like to take these terms, which are still used to describe the series of mostly urban protests in 1980 and 1981, as a starting point to reflect upon the implications and assumptions that accompany these concepts. The aim is to situate these concepts within the broader literature about protest and social movements and to discuss the implications of these labels. In doing so, I do not claim that the phenomena of the time should not be identified as youth movements, youth protests or whichever labels were chosen. Instead of trying to find the 'correct' label – a task that is bound to fail, because the labels always reflect analytical concepts and do not directly represent the empirical reality – I would rather like to add a layer of self-reflection to the study of these phenomena by discussing the epistemological presumptions that are ingrained in the labels used to describe them.

The dominant notion – that the two most notable aspects of the urban protests in 1980–81 were the youthfulness of their protagonists and the violence of their interaction with the authorities – implicitly suggests two perspectives in order to understand these protests: a generational perspective and a focus on repertoires of action.

At first glance the reference to youth states merely that the rebellious protagonists – or at least most of them – are below a certain age. Yet the term not only provides a description but also offers an explanation for the social phenomenon. Those authors who explicitly label the contentious episode as youth protest, youth movement or youth revolt are thereby claiming that the unifying element among the protagonists is their age or, more precisely, the fact that they belong to the same age cohort. An explanation for their actions should thus either reference the specific historical experiences this age cohort shares exclusively with those of the same age (and not with older generations), or the reference to youth may point to a conflict between two generations, most likely between the generations of the activists and their parents.

On the other hand, the focus on violence – a focus that is so dominant in contemporary studies – suggests that somehow an analysis of the forms and repertoires of action might help to understand the protests and their dynamics. This phenomenological perspective highlights the similarities between instances of contention with regard to their forms of action. It characterizes the social phenomenon by its outer form, more specifically by the fact that the forms of action breach the confines of generally accepted and institutionalized forms of participation. This phenomenological perspective links the various events, mobilizations and other forms of social interaction through their shared means and/ or repertoires of action.

In addition to these two perspectives the terms unrest, protest, movement, rebellion and revolt also suggest, to different degrees, a certain embeddedness of the concrete contentious events within broader, more or less aggregated, episodes of collective action or processes of social change.

In this chapter I situate the generational and phenomenological perspectives in the larger body of social-movement research and discuss their usefulness for understanding the protests in 1980–81. I argue that the episodes of protest should be interpreted as being related to each other and embedded in structures and dynamics of social conflict that stretch, in time and scope, beyond the single episodes themselves.

Youth – the generational perspective

The reference to youth can imply both a strong and a weak generational perspective. A strong version of a generational perspective would explain the protests of 1980–81 with the historically specific experiences of one generation or a manifest conflict between the specific young generation and their parents, or with a combination of both. Such a strong version of a generational perspective was present in the contemporary psychological interpretation that the protests in 1980–81 were result of an incomplete break by the young protesters from their parents.[7] This view can be found in other research about social movements and conflict as well, but usually with a critical reflection on the appropriateness of the term 'generation' to define protesters.[8] The problem of this strong generational model is that it proposes a general rift between two generations at one point in time. But while protesters may come from one generation it is never a whole generation that protests. Those engaged in contentious interactions are always only a minority of the age cohort as a whole. A strong generational model is therefore not well suited to explain protest because it would always have to explain the lack of protest in the majority of persons belonging to one generation.

Other studies using the generational concept do not usually refer to an age cohort but to a notion of activist generations, characterized by shared experiences and not primarily by shared age. In her book about the development of the radical women's movement in the United States, for example, Nancy Whittier uses the term 'feminist generations' to refer to groups of activists, who have participated in the women's movement at the same time.[9] A generation of activists, as such, does not share the same age but the same period of engagement. They are political, not age, cohorts. The concept of generations is then not used to explain the emergence of a movement but to analyse its development over time.

More common is another, much weaker, generational concept that builds on the general idea that a person's age might have a strong influence on his or her propensity to participate in protests and/or social movements. This reflects the idea that youth (however this is defined) would be a biographical phase in which people are more likely to participate in protests. This interpretation is quite common in several studies about the protests in 1980–81. In his study of the protests in Zurich, Hanspeter Kriesi argues that youth should be understood as a transitional phase of emancipation from the confines of the family and before full integration into the labour market with its own strict set of rules.[10] This transitional phase offers the potential for a relatively high level of personal freedom

but is also characterized by the instability of status passages.[11] Several authors also argue that younger people are more sensitive than older people to the problems of their societies.[12] One might therefore assume that younger people above a certain age should show greater biographical proclivity to protest because they have less work and family obligations and, therefore fewer reasons, which might hinder their engagement.

The problem with this assumption is that, in a similar way to the strong generational concept, the notion that the particularities of this transitional phase between childhood and adulthood would explain the protest of 1980–81 has to address the issue of *differential* participation in protests by persons from the same age group. Only a minority of each age group takes to the streets, while the conditions of greater biographical proclivity should be relevant for all young people. Moreover such a perspective would also have to explain why the youth-specific factors affecting persons of a certain age have created fertile conditions for protest only at a specific point in time. Did the conditions of socialization for young people change significantly between 1975 and 1980?

The problem with both the strong and the weak generational perspectives is that they attempt to explain activities of a specific minority of young people at one point in time, with general claims about general conditions of socialization for all – or at least the majority of – people of a certain age group. A generational claim ('We are speaking in the name of a whole generation!') may be a legitimate political empowerment strategy, but as an analytical category it can never work. Generational or age-related conditions of socialization can only ever be one factor among others that comprise a more complex explanation.

Moreover, the notion of youth protests in the early 1980s may be superficially plausible but rests on weak empirical evidence. Unfortunately, information about the demographics of protesters in general, and about protesters at that time specifically, is rather limited and usually rests on police records of persons detained during particularly violent events.[13] While general surveys often show the propensity to protest as declining with age, this assumption has not been generally confirmed in those cases in which research has produced reliable information about the age of participants in protests or social movements. Existing studies do not give a clear indication of youth (or old age) as either a propagating or an inhibiting factor for participation in social movements.

For example, in his study about the participants in the 'freedom summer' mobilization of the US civil rights movement in 1964, Doug McAdam has shown that there was no linear relationship between age and participation in this form of high-risk activism. Participation rose

among 'freedom summer' activists between the age of 18 and 21, then dropped and then rose again with age.[14] Studies that have looked at the age of participants in protests in Germany consistently show the age group of 40–64 to be overrepresented compared to their proportion of the overall population, whereas those under 25 are generally underrepresented, and those between 25 and 39 are overrepresented only in peace protests.[15] A comparative study of the worldwide anti Iraq war protest on 15 February 2003 shows the youngest age cohort of 15–25 year olds as overrepresented in some countries (Italy, Germany, Sweden) and underrepresented in others (United States, Spain).[16]

Overall, therefore, research on social movements has so far not produced evidence supporting either the strong or the weak generational perspective. This does not mean that such a perspective may not be quite fruitful in some instances. But it should remind us that the generational hypothesis is demanding if its claim goes beyond the simple observation that many young people have participated in a given protest. For example, such a demanding claim would be that a specific social condition, one which enabled certain forms of protest in the early 1980s, would have influenced only people from a distinct age cohort.

But even if the notion of generational or age cohorts may not be that helpful for the analysis of protest dynamics in the early 1980s, the generational perspective can point to the importance of biographies to understand movement participation by accounting for individual and sometimes collectively shared pre-histories of movement engagement.[17] In fact, the studies of the protests in 1980–81 often provide biographical narratives from movement activists about their motivations and their interpretations of the protests.

Violence – the phenomenological perspective

I use the term phenomenological perspective to describe a perspective that focuses on a social phenomenon's outer form. From this perspective, social movements are defined by their forms and repertoires of action. For the protests in 1980–81 the one repertoire on which most commentators (and many researchers) focused was the violent nature of interaction with the police. To be fair: many researchers and journalists did not reduce the protests to this singular aspect of violence and explicitly presented insights into the activists' everyday practices and their motivations beyond any limited focus on the violent confrontations.[18] But the violence nevertheless often provided a somewhat reductive starting point for the analysis.

In general a phenomenological perspective addresses important aspects of social movements, because it pays attention to a protest's outer forms and thus takes the deliberately chosen form of the activists' self-presentation seriously. In a widely cited definition, Charles Tilly argues that social movements should be understood as a political complex, combining three elements: '(1) Campaigns of collective claims on target authorities; (2) A array of claim-making performances including special-purpose associations, public meetings, media statements and demonstrations; (3) public representations of the cause's worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment'.[19] So, for him, the specific forms and repertoires of action are important elements that differentiate social movements from earlier forms of collective action – forms which were not yet social movements and therefore followed different logics and objectives. In Tilly's historical perspective the characteristic repertoire of a social movement co-evolves with the development of democratic societies that have a parliamentary decision-making process at their core.

Dieter Rucht also includes a reference to the use of protest – although he is much less specific than Tilly and only uses the generic term in his definition of a social movement as a 'lasting action system of mobilized networks of groups and organizations, based on collective identity, and aimed at creating, preventing or reversing social change by means of public protest'.[20] In a very similar way Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani define social movements as: '(1) Informal networks, based on (2) shared beliefs and solidarity, which mobilize about (3) conflictual issues, through (4) the frequent use of various forms of protest'.[21] In their definition, another element of outer form is present: the characterization of social movements as informal networks – although this refers not so much to the phenomenological level that is immediately visible to the outside observer, but to a structural property of the social relations that form a social movement.

A certain focus on morphological similarities is also present in Sidney Tarrow's concept of protest cycles, in which phases of the protest trajectory are characterized by more or less disruptive forms of protest,[22] or Ruud Koopmans' analysis of protest waves.[23] Due to the synchronicity of events across several countries and the interplay between multiple social movements in the early 1980s (women, peace, environment, nuclear energy and so forth), this concept seems to be especially relevant for an analysis of the embeddedness of the urban youth protests.

Obviously none of the cited definitions claim that social movements should be characterized only by their forms of action. They all include a reference to the forms and repertoires of action as being merely one

element among others. None of the authors mentioned so far would differentiate social movements, purely by their outer form, from other forms of collective action. Tarrow even explicitly denounces the reduction by both social scientists and political commentators of social movements to their use of violent forms of protest, claiming that 'rather than seeing social movements as expressions of extremism, violence and deprivation, they are better defined as collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities'.[24] But form is nevertheless one indispensable element.

Insisting on including specific forms of action in a definition of social movements is not a tautology, although it might somehow sound logical that a reference to protest should show up in any definition of social movements. Nevertheless, for the majority of definitions found in academic literature this is, in fact, not the case. Forms of action are not mentioned in either Herbert Blumer's classical definition of social movements as 'collective enterprises to establish a new order of life',[25] or in John McCarthy's and Mayer Zald's influential article in which they presented the outlines of the resource mobilization approach and defined a social movement as 'a set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society'.[26] The reason is that in these conceptualizations, which differ substantially in their epistemological assumptions, social movements are primarily interpreted as expressions of social conflict, regardless of the mobilized form these conflicts take.

In contrast, a phenomenological perspective pays attention to the ways in which participants in social movements present themselves in public. Such a perspective assumes the outer form of protests to be deliberate and therefore a significant expression by protest participants themselves. It looks at protest practices as performances in which cultural symbols are reproduced and reinterpreted.[27] From a cultural perspective, the focus is not limited to the single instances of violent confrontation on the streets, but it analyses such violence in relation to other cultural practices of a movement.

Embedding the protests – unrest versus social movement

Among the terms unrest, protest, movement, rebellion and revolt, unrest is the least specific and most diffuse. Unrest refers to the disturbance of an otherwise stable order, yet this disturbance has no identifiable collective protagonist – apart maybe from a diffuse social category of youth.

In contrast, protest always implies a strongly antagonistic perspective and a deliberate orientation towards reaching the protest's goals, but it is unspecific with regard to its duration. I would argue that the term social movement should imply a certain continuity over time, but the above-cited definitions do not always contain this element.

Rebellion and revolt, on the other hand, are the terms most closely associated with social transformation.[28] Using these terms suggests that the protagonists involved have fundamentally challenged existing social power structures and were not content with reform and piecemeal policy change. These terms therefore imply a focus on processes of social change. The same can also be true for the term social movement. Depending on the historical period and also depending on the field, actor-driven processes of (fundamental) social change have variously been labelled as revolutions, revolts, uprisings, social movements or social conflicts. The choice of terms depends to a certain degree on the level and scope of change or on the temporal trajectory, with revolution, revolt and uprising describing episodes of accelerated social change, while the terms social movement and social conflict stand for slower change.

In their *Dynamics of Contention*, McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly have actually suggested that these terms describe social phenomena that have so much in common that they are not neatly separable, and an integration of the research on revolutions, revolts, industrial conflicts and social movements under the unified concept of contentious politics would be needed.[29] Fourteen years later, however, one has to concede that their proposal was so far not very successful in uniting different disciplinary strands of research.

Regardless of whether the various terms should be unified into one super-concept, the terms movement, rebellion and revolt situate the individual episode of protest in a larger framework of societal and political change and thus suggest a political or social-process perspective that is at the heart of most social-movement research. This perspective comes in many varieties that can be roughly divided into: a strong version, with a focus on processes of social change, and a weak version, with a focus on interaction and the policymaking process. What unites them is that they all understand social movements to be forms of contentious interaction embedded in social and political structures – structures they try to influence and change.

In the strongest version, social movements are seen as direct expressions of historical social conflicts. This was the perspective adopted the French post-Marxist sociologist Alain Touraine when he defined social movements as 'a special type of social conflict' about the control of

'cultural patterns (knowledge, investment, ethics) in a given societal type'.[30] Touraine wanted to find the one new social movement that would become the heir of the workers' movement. For him, social movement was therefore not so much an empirical but a theoretical concept. And after realizing that none of the empirical protest mobilizations of his time would fulfil the thusly assigned historical role, his interest in social movements faded.

The strong version of the idea that social movements are inherently intertwined with processes of social change is also prominent in the works of the Italian social-movement researcher Alberto Melucci, who defines a social movement as a specific form of collective action. For him a social movement is 'the mobilization of a collective actor (1) defined by specific solidarity, (2) engaged in a conflict with an adversary for the appropriation and control of resources valued by both of them, (3) and whose action entails a breach of the limits of compatibility of the system within which the action itself takes place'.[31] As one specific form of collective action, a social movement is therefore more or less similar to other forms of collective action that differ along one or more of the three dimensions – conflict versus consensus, solidarity versus aggregation, breaching versus maintaining the system limits.

Like Touraine, Melucci uses the term social movement as an analytical concept, but unlike Touraine he does not see social movements as mere expressions of societal cleavage. On the contrary, he was very interested in the empirical variety of protest mobilizations, and in the not-so-visible everyday practices of social-movement activists. Melucci argues that contemporary social movements are not just a string of visible protests but are in fact submerged networks,[32] submerged in everyday life, and alternating between short phases of visibility and longer stretches of latency. His study of social movements in the early 1980s in Italy refocused attention from the highly visible protest events to the less visible, but (arguably for the continuity of the movements) more important emerging social structures in which activists attempted to immediately realize their ideas for alternative social norms and structures.

In the strong version, social movements and social change are closely connected, so that social movements either cause social change or are expressions of it. In the weak version, the idea of social change is reduced to policy change, and the focus lies therefore on the interaction between social movements and other protagonists within the policymaking process. The core claim of this strand of the political-process perspective is that a social movement's chances to influence the policymaking process depend upon favourable political opportunity structures.[33] At

their core, these political opportunity structures consist of institutional procedures and settings, (national) political cultures and the constellation of potential allies and opponents. It is generally assumed that more accessible and open formal political institutions, unstable alignments and divided elites provide better opportunities for social movements to have their claims realized.[34] While the political-process perspective has often been criticized for being too unspecific about which factors should and which factors should not be included in the political structure, its important conceptual contribution clearly lies in its focus on the embeddedness of social movements. The political-process perspective always reminds us that activities of protesters and social movements should be analysed in relation to the environment in which they are embedded.

Analysing the protests in 1980–81 from a political or social-process perspective means embedding the events in Zurich, Amsterdam, Berlin and elsewhere in the respective local trajectories of contestation and relating them to the basic social and political conditions of their time. This perspective was present in Hanspeter Kriesi's study on what he calls 'The Zurich Movement (Die Zürcher Bewegung)', in which he analyses the continuity and conflict between the 1980 protests in Zurich and the remnants of the protest wave of the 1968 students' movement in an alternative urban counter-culture.[35] It also guided Helmut Willems's comparative study of a variety of conflicts and protest episodes in several European countries around 1980–81, and which he interpreted as structures and (alternative) norms producing episodes of conflict.[36]

Conclusion

What can be gained from this meta-discussion of terms and concepts for the analysis of the contentious episodes in 1980–81? As mentioned above, terminology is not innocent. The terms used to label a protest come with attached concepts and are therefore embedded within specific theoretical perspectives. The history of social-movement research is also a history of struggles about the proper term for the social phenomenon the research is about. I do not think that agreement on one term should be the goal, but a reflection of the implications of terminology will certainly help in the analysis.

The different perspectives highlight different aspects of the empirical phenomena. A phenomenological perspective with a focus on morphological similarities may help to better understand the universe of protest in the early 1980s by identifying diffusion and transfer processes of protest repertoires and cultural expressions. How, for example, did

protest repertoires in the squatters' movement travel from city to city and across national borders? How was it possible, that a squatted house in Amsterdam, Berlin, Copenhagen or Zurich looked essentially the same? How was it possible that an activist from Amsterdam felt immediately 'at home' in a squat in Hamburg and vice versa? In more general terms, the phenomenological perspective may help to answer the question: Which social processes can be identified that enabled the diffusion of repertoires and led to the emergence of similar sociocultural scenes?

Taking the generational perspective seriously would mean to not just describe the demographics of the protesters, but to use those demographics as an explanatory element. Compared to other protests of the time – for example, about nuclear energy and world peace – it certainly makes sense to characterize the urban protests of the early 1980s as youth protests. But the question then is: What differentiates them from the other protests? What were the specific conditions of greater youth participation in the urban protests? How can the notion that they are somehow a generational phenomenon help to explain their emergence and trajectory?

Neither the generational perspective nor the phenomenological perspective addresses one important aspect of the protests of the early 1980s: Those protests developed their disruptive and provocative potential not only on the political, but to an important – and maybe even larger – degree also on the cultural level. The notion of submerged networks captures this interplay between cultural innovation and political activity. The violent clashes with the police that surprised and shocked liberal and conservative commentators alike were only the visible tip of the proverbial iceberg. Below the level of public visibility or, more precisely, less noted by the general public, dense social networks and local infrastructures had developed that facilitated alternative lifestyles and everyday practices. The so-called youth revolt in 1980–81 is intricately connected to the emergence of social-movement scenes, defined as networks of people who share a common identity and a common set of subcultural or countercultural beliefs, values, norms and convictions, and simultaneously as networks of physical spaces where members of that group are known to congregate.[37] Such a perspective highlights the fact that the protests around 1980 drew on resources provided by earlier social movements and, at the same time, created new resources that have enabled later mobilizations.

Finally, the term unrest, which has often been used to describe the protests of the early 1980s, encapsulates an image of stability and disturbance, where the more or less stable social normality is periodically interrupted by instances of disorder, like ripples on the flat surface of a lake

caused by a stone thrown into it. Instead of ripples, there may even be a storm that violently agitates the waters, but after a period of agitation the lake surface will invariably return to its calm state of rest. This is not a very good image for the events in the years 1980 and 1981. Instead, they should be analysed as social and thus relational phenomena. The people who participated have been embedded in complex social networks, and the events themselves are related to each other, to earlier and later contentious mobilizations, to the national and transnational political sphere and to changing social structures in societies that were undergoing fundamental changes at the end of the industrial age. The episodes of protest should always be interpreted as being embedded in social-conflict structures and dynamics, which stretch in time and scope beyond any single episode. Whether these episodes are labelled social movements, revolts, protests or something else depends on the analytical categories that provide the lens through which to analyse the empirical phenomena.

Notes

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11. S. Kurtenbach (2012) 'Jugendproteste – blockierte Statuspassagen als einigendes Band' *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, vol. 62, no. 25–26, 48–54.
12. H.-E. Richter (1981) 'Die neue Sensibilität. 19 Thesen über die Hintergründe der Jugendbewegung' in Haller, *Aussteigen oder rebellieren*, p. 238; R. G. Braungart and M. M. Braungart (1990) 'Youth Movements in the 1980s: A Global Perspective' *International Sociology*, vol. 5, no. 2, 179.
13. For example, Kriesi, *Die Zürcher Bewegung*, p. 213; Willems, *Jugendunruhen und Protestbewegungen*, pp. 159, 272.
14. D. McAdam (1986) 'Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer' *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 92, no. 1, 84.
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18. Bacia et al., *Passt bloss auf!*; Haller, *Aussteigen oder rebellieren*; Kriesi, *Die Zürcher Bewegung*; Nigg, *Wir wollen alles, und zwar subito!*
19. C. Tilly (2004) *Social Movements, 1768–2004* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers), p. 7.
20. 'Eine soziale Bewegung ist ein auf gewisse Dauer gestelltes und durch kollektive Identität abgestütz-tes Handlungssystem mobilisierter Netzwerke von Gruppen und Organisationen, welche sozialen Wandel mittels öffentlicher Proteste herbeiführen, verhindern oder rückgängig machen wollen.' D. Rucht (1994) 'Öffentlichkeit als Mobilisierungsfaktor für soziale Bewegungen' in F. Neidhard (ed.) (1994) *Öffentlichkeit, öffentliche Meinung, soziale Bewegungen, KZfSS, Sonderheft 34/1994* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag), p. 338.
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35. Kriesi, *Die Zürcher Bewegung.*

36. Willems, *Jugendunruhen und Protestbewegungen*, p. 484.

37. D. K. Leach and S. Haunss (2009) 'Scenes and Social Movements' in Johnston (ed.) *Culture, Social Movements, and Protest*, p. 259.