Course description

Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could only do a little.

- Edmund Burke

Social movements are collective attempts to change the way people live their lives, how governments govern, and how economic systems produce and distribute goods. We live in a social movement society. Though we are not always aware of the level of activism going on around us, the number and different types of organizations working to create some type of social change is larger than ever before. Globalization and communications technologies have broken down barriers to worldwide participation in movements for change. Understanding how the world is influenced by individuals working together for change is of vital importance.

This class focuses on theoretical domains in the sociological study of social movements and general social processes rather than on specific movements. Substantive work on specific movements is used to explain issues such as mobilization, tactics, and ideology, among other factors.

Social movements are critical for understanding two of the most central problems in sociology: “How do systems that distribute valued goods change”? and “How are systems of meaning created”? Although social movements have existed for centuries, during the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, they have become common ways for ordinary people to make their identities known and to elicit legal and economic changes.

This course counts toward the GSFS major.

Course goals & objectives

The major goal of this course is to cultivate and sharpen your spoken and written ability to critically evaluate sociological scholarship on social movements. By the end of this course students are expected to have achieved the following:

1) Demonstrate knowledge of the major perspectives in social movements research.

2) Critically assess the development of social movements through key theoretical perspectives.

3) Understand how social movements succeed or fail.

Required course materials

All course readings are provided to you on Blackboard.
Course requirements

Local movement/activism group essay

Oberlin, as you know, has a wide variety of activist oriented work going on. You are required to attend one meeting (at least) of a movement group on campus and take field notes on what you observe OR to interview a member of a student activist group on campus. I will spend some time in class discussing the best practices of participant observation and taking field notes, as well as interviewing. You will give me a synopsis (3 pages) of what you observed as well as your assessment of how the movement group is organizing itself, how it may find success or failure, and how concepts from class readings could be applied to the organization/group. You will briefly (3-5 minutes) present your synopsis to the class at the end of the semester. The combination of synopsis paper and presentation is worth 30% of your overall grade. More details to come in class. The paper is due 5/9, but can be turned in at any time before this date; presentations will begin on May 1st, in class.

Analytical papers.

You will write four analytical papers throughout the semester. These should be 4-5 pages. I will hand out instructions for each in class, on the days listed in the course schedule below. You will notice there are 5 analytical papers total. You will choose which 4 of the 5 to write. Due dates for these papers are listed below. Late papers will be deducted one letter grade per day returned late. Generally, these papers will pose a set of questions that ask you to evaluate concepts from readings, or from your own experience, and to assess their relative importance to the success or failure of social movements. These papers are worth a total of 70% of your overall grade.

Other relevant course information

Sociological research can descriptively map the contours and proportions of social life by simplifying features of the social world relevant to a particular interest and representing them with symbols...All such descriptions oversimplify the complexity of the real social world in which we live...But, as with maps generally, such simplified descriptions can help to provide an overarching sense of our social world, where we stand within it, and what it looks like beyond our immediate field of vision.

- Christian Smith, Soul Searching

1 – I am generally easier to reach by email than by phone.

2 – Laptops are permitted in class for course related work only. Please do not come to class if you plan to surf the web. You are wasting both of our time.

3 – Attendance and active participation in class will only help your overall grade. The papers are much easier to write if you read and attend.

Grading scale

| 97-100 A+ | 87-89 B+ | 77-79 C+ | 60-69 D |
| 93-96 A | 83-86 B | 73-76 C | 0-59 F |
Course Schedule and Reading list

2/4 Syllabus overview and course introduction
1) Frank, Thomas – “Why Johnny Can’t Dissent”

2/6 What is a social movement?

2/11 Theoretical foundations.


2/18 Media

2/20 *Analytical paper #1 due via email attachment by 5 pm*

2/25 States and Political Opportunities


3/4 Documentary – “The Fight in the Fields”

3/6 3) Noonan, Rita – “Women against the State: Political Opportunities and Collective Action Frames in Chile’s Transition to Democracy.” Sociological Forum


3/13 Cultural Resistance, Framing, and Identity
1) Williams, Rhys – “Constructing the Public Good: Social Movements and Cultural Resources.” *Social Problems*

2) From activists – Check out Reverend Billy of the Church of Stop Shopping on YouTube and at: [http://www.revbilly.com/](http://www.revbilly.com/)

3/18  
*Analytical paper #2 due via email attachment by 5 pm*

Documentary – “What Would Jesus Buy”

3/20  
3) McAdam, Doug – “Gender as Mediator of the Activist Experience: The Case of Freedom Summer.” *American Journal of Sociology*

4/1  
4) Bernstein, Mary – “Celebration and Suppression: The Strategic Uses of Identity by the Lesbian and Gay Movement.” *American Journal of Sociology*

4/3  

4/8  
*Direct Action*


4/10  
*Analytical paper #3 due via email attachment by 5 pm*


4/15  
3) Soule, Sarah – “The Student Divestment Movement in the United States and Tactical Diffusion.” *Social Forces*

4/17  

4/22  
*Organizing and Organizations*


4/24  
*Analytical paper #4 due via email attachment by 5 pm*


4/29  
3) Morris, Aldon D. – “Black Southern Student Sit-In Movement: An Analysis of Internal Organization.” In *Social Movements: Readings on their Emergence, Mobilization, and Dynamics*.

5/1  
Local movement/activism presentations
Course behavior expectations

Who speaks, sows. Who listens, reaps.

- Argentine proverb

I do want you to speak in class (in fact I will implore you to almost every day), but keep in mind that the most effective way for you to be a high quality speaker is to be a high quality listener. Learning in our classroom should be a collective endeavor therefore the success of the whole depends on the ability of individuals to participate with this goal in mind. Please turn off cell phones during class. If there is a specific reason you need your phone on (i.e. emergency) let me know. Do not talk or whisper conversations with your neighbors (unless otherwise directed) during class, it is distracting to the rest of the class and to me. We only meet for about 2.5 hours per week. Be present (not just in the physical sense)! When interacting in class be respectful of other opinions and listen intently. Intelligent and thoughtful discussion about social issues can be intense, so be certain you frame your comments in a respectful manner.

Honor code

This course is covered by the Oberlin College honor code which means that you are to produce your own work unless otherwise instructed. Consulting with librarians, tutors, and me is okay, but the work you submit must be yours. Any case of suspected plagiarism will be reported to the Honors Committee. For every assignment you must write/type at the top of the first page, “I affirm that I have adhered to the honor code in this assignment.” For more information see:


Special needs

I encourage students with documented disabilities, including non-visible disabilities such as chronic diseases, learning disabilities, head injury, attention deficit/hyperactive disorder, or psychiatric disabilities, to discuss appropriate accommodations with me. You will need to provide documentation of your disability to the Office of Disability Services in Peters G-27/G-28.

This syllabus is tentative and may be subject to change.