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, as well as how the social context in which a movement takes place matters.

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.

Course goals & objectives

The major goal of this course is to 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

1) All course readings are provided to you on Blackboard.
2) $20 to be used for the “$20.00 Project”.

Course requirements

$20 Project

This project, which you can decide to do alone or in groups, seeks to dispel the notion that individuals are merely the passive recipients of social reality and that social change is largely something that results from evolution or the natural state of things. Through the $20 Project you will see that with very few resources you can still achieve some level of social change by thinking creatively, joining together collectively, and working energetically. Each individual or group will present their results on the last scheduled day of class before finals. Details of the assignment are posted to Blackboard. By 3/21 you should have decided who you are working with and what cause or social problem you will be addressing. Before this date, students are encouraged to make a case for their particular issue in class in an attempt to recruit group members. As you will see in the details posted to Blackboard the size of groups is entirely up to you. The combination of presentation and your peers’ review of your contribution are worth 20% of your final grade.

Local movement 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. You will give me a short synopsis/summary (no more than 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. Your synopsis/summary is worth 10% of your overall grade. More details to come in class. The summary paper is due 5/9, but can be turned in at any time before this date.

Analytical papers.

You will write three 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’ll notice there are 5 analytical papers total. You will choose which 3 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 and to assess their relative importance to the success or failure of social movements. These papers are worth a total of 30% of your overall grade.

Examinations.

There are 2 exams for this course; the final examination is not comprehensive. These exams are written. I will distribute exam review sheets that you should rely on when preparing for the midterm and final exams. The questions will come directly from assigned readings and lecture/discussion in class. These exams make up 40% 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.

**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 an effective speaker is to also be an effective listener. This allows for actual discussion and not just people talking past each other. 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.

**Course Schedule and Reading list**

2/5 Syllabus overview and course introduction
Reading - Frank, Thomas – “Why Johnny Can’t Dissent”

2/7

What is a social movement?


2/12

Theoretical foundations.


2/14


* Instructions for analytical paper #1 distributed

2/19

Media


2/21


2/26

States and Political Opportunities


2/28


3/5

Documentary – “The Fight in the Fields”

* Analytical paper #1 due via email by 10 PM

3/7

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

*Midterm review sheet distributed in class

3/12


* Instructions for analytical paper #2 distributed

3/14

Midterm examination
3/19  
*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:


3/21  
Documentary – “What Would Jesus Buy”

* Analytical paper #2 due via email by 10 PM

* $20 groups must be formed and issue identified

4/2  
3) McAdam, Doug – “Gender as Mediator of the Activist Experience: The Case of Freedom Summer.” *American Journal of Sociology*

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

* Instructions for analytical paper #3 distributed in class

4/9  

4/11  
*Direct Action*


4/16  

* Analytical paper #3 due via email by 10 PM

4/18  
3) Soule, Sarah – “The Student Divestment Movement in the United States and Tactical Diffusion.” *Social Forces*

* Instructions for analytical paper #4 distributed in class

4/23  

4/25  
Documentary – “Zapatista”

4/30  
*Organizing and Organizations*

* Analytical paper #4 due via email by 10 PM

5/2


* Instructions for analytical paper #5 distributed in class

* Final examination review sheet distributed in class.

5/7

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*.

5/9

$20 Project Presentations

* Analytical paper #5 due via email by 10 PM

* Local movement group essay due by 10 PM

5/?

Final examination

**Grading scale**

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This syllabus is tentative and may be subject to change.