

DAVID S. MEYER



**HOW SOCIAL
MOVEMENTS
(SOMETIMES) MATTER**

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Dedication

To Zena, Jean, and their generation, who will remake the
world.

And to Bill Gamson, who always reminded me of that fact.

How Social Movements (Sometimes) Matter

David S. Meyer

polity

Copyright Page

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Introduction

People protest in all kinds of ways and for all sorts of reasons: they protest because they're disappointed or angry; they protest because they want to connect with others who share their views; they protest because someone invited them. Most importantly, they protest because they want to have an impact on the world around them. They want to make the world better – or at least stop it from getting worse. This book is about how and why protest *sometimes* works. These are questions of critical importance in modern life, and ones people who protest and those who watch them are asking more and more.

An example: On the January day that Donald Trump took the oath of office for the American presidency, thousands of frustrated protesters staged a wide variety of events. Gay and lesbian activists staged a Queer Dance party outside incoming Vice President Mike Pence's residence featuring a variety of music, costumes, flags, and a lot of glitter. More aggressively, hundreds of DisruptJ20 protesters launched unpermitted marches through the streets of Washington, DC, protesting US foreign policy, inequality, and discrimination. The demonstrators certainly had grievances with the incoming Trump administration, but importantly, planning for the demonstration had begun in July 2016, when it appeared that Hillary Clinton was sure to win.

As announced on an organizing site: "DisruptJ20 rejects all forms of domination and oppression, particularly those based on racism, poverty, gender, and sexuality, organizes by consensus, and embraces a diversity of tactics."¹ Organizers emphasized urgency and tactics rather than issues, proclaiming their ideological and tactical diversity, while promising not to help law enforcement maintain

public order. A few worked hard to disrupt public order, using bricks to break the windows of a limousine and several storefronts, including the entrances to a Starbucks and a Bank of America. Police arrested more than 200 people for being in the streets amid the destruction, and the federal government lodged harsh felony charges for conspiracy to riot that could have resulted in decades in prison.²

The day after the inauguration and the DisruptJ20 events, much larger groups staged a Women's March in Washington, with hundreds of thousands filling the national mall, and a much larger number animating sister marches across the country and around the world. Millions protested, and although they expressed many grievances, there was a unified focus on the unsuitability of Donald Trump as president of the United States.

Protesters could take some comfort in their commitment, their solidarity, their numbers, and their acumen in organizing such a large set of events so quickly. But Donald Trump didn't resign, and immediately set about executing some of the policies that he campaigned on, policies that protesters found abhorrent. Does that mean that the various protests during the inaugural weekend were futile?

I start with an example from the United States because, as an American, I see them close up, sometimes in person, but more often in books and articles, and I hear stories told in classrooms. I see the impact of social movements in American history, and I understand the context in which they developed. As we work through this book, there will be more stories about social movements in the United States than in other settings, but I will show how the processes that we see in play can be translated to understand the politics of protest elsewhere, providing examples from social movements in very different contexts.

Protests against authority are hardly limited to the United States. In just the last few years, organized protests against authorities have erupted around the world. In Turkey, Iran, and Russia, recurrent campaigns for democratic reforms have dogged authoritarian leaders. Activists deployed umbrellas as a symbol of their commitment to democracy in Hong Kong. Citizens filled the streets in Tunisia, protesting against the cost of living and the government's austerity policies – and this government had come to office in response to another set of protests in the Arab Spring movements just a few years earlier. Activists have lodged anti-austerity protests against left, right, and centrist governments in Greece since 2011, and Europe has been racked with disruptive protests targeting immigrants and immigration policy. Mass movements have surged in the capital cities of Thailand, Belarus, and Lebanon, in response to crises, political and otherwise. These protesters everywhere turn out because they see the failure or futility of more conventional political actions, and they think there's at least a chance that protests might work.

But protests haven't been limited to efforts to mount anti-systemic campaigns. Protesters routinely turn out to support or prevent changes in policy, sometimes in colorful and creative ways: Five scantily clad women representing People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), and costumed as animals, marched outside a fashion show in Sydney, Australia, calling for animal rights.³ Actress Lucy Lawless, best known inhabiting the title role in *Xena: Warrior Princess*, brought global attention to an international group of environmental activists determined to challenge Norway's efforts to search for new oil reserves in the Barents Sea. The activists boarded small rubber boats to block the path of much larger ships heading off on their exploration.⁴ An estimated 50,000 people marched in London to protest the United Kingdom's planned exit from

the European Union, a decision taken by referendum a year earlier.⁵ All these protests are dramatic moments in larger sustained movements animated by people who want to change the world.

Social movements of all kinds and sizes campaign for an extremely diverse array of goals: against hikes in university tuition, austere budget policies, taxes, corruption, immigration, and carbon emissions – to name only a few recent issues. In much of the world, social movements have grown into a virtually permanent presence in mainstream politics, often supported by state subsidies or tax preferences. National and transnational groups concerned with the environment or human rights advocate for their visions of justice, sometimes engaging in mass politics.

These are only a sampling of relatively recent examples of mass movements attempting to step into the political fray, redress wrongs, and change the world. When you read this, you will be able to find stories of even more recent protests and campaigns that are just as odd, interesting, appalling, or inspiring. There's an excitement and a romance associated with regular people trying to step into history and change the world, but do their efforts matter? Would people turn out to protest if they thought they couldn't make a difference?

Sometimes, they do.

We tell stories about movements that seem to play a critical role in affecting change. Gandhi's Salt March is part of the Indian Independence movement's success story. Similarly, Lech Walesa's leadership of the Solidarity movement in Poland during the Cold War is seen as a critical factor in the end of Communism, democratization of Poland, and the end of the Soviet Union. In the United States, schoolchildren learn to celebrate historic protest moments, including the Boston Tea Party and the 1963 March on

Washington, and their impact on making the United States what it became. But those histories often pull the moments out of the context of the larger movements of which they were a part.

Politicians and political activists certainly act as if social movements might matter, and scholars have been trying, for the better part of at least four decades, to figure out why, when, and how. Although we know more than we did previously, discussions about the origins and influences of social movements frequently retreat into competitive assertions about what mattered and what was irrelevant. Obviously, people who talk about social movements in general, and even more so, about particular social movements, often have a strong stake in valorizing or vilifying them. People often react to movements by creating heroes or villains. And the question of potential effectiveness is generally the most important criterion in evaluating a movement. Courageous heroes broker sacrifices that could lead to political influence; misguided misanthropes act out when it doesn't matter.

Our histories show that protests can matter a great deal, but not by themselves, and often not in ways activists intend. When King George III learned that colonists had dressed as Indians to throw discounted tea into the Boston Harbor, one of many acts of resistance, he saw his empire unraveling and responded harshly. Repression spurred further protests – and ultimately, America. It wasn't the Tea Party by itself that made the American revolution successful; rather, the events one night at Boston Harbor were part of a much longer, larger, and more complicated process that included other protests, armed conflict, speeches and pamphlets, and more mainstream politics in the colonies and England. Although throwing crates of tea off a ship makes for a dramatic story, it is only by putting

that protest in a larger context that we can understand how movements really matter.

In this book, we'll see how protest movements *sometimes* work to influence politics, policy, and culture, and show how a protest in the streets can translate into something more than an afternoon's entertainment. We will also see the numerous contingencies involved in movement politics, as well as the necessities of alliances within government and mainstream politics.

It's crucial to understand that protests can best be understood as part of a larger social and political process, and that mainstream politics provides obstacles for organizers to navigate and tools that they can use to increase their influence in a variety of ways. Social protests change the world, but they can't do it by themselves; they depend upon mobilizing others to act on their behalf, and activists have little control over the ultimate outcomes of their efforts.

Here's the argument: When people protest, they tell authorities that they're unhappy about something and, often implicitly, threaten to do more than protest: vote, contribute money, lobby, set up a picket, blockade a road, or try to blow up a building, in hopes of getting what they want. Opponents and allies in government make judgments about how strong and widely held demonstrators' grievances are, and respond, sometimes with concessions and reforms, sometimes with harsh repression, and sometimes with a mix of both. Social movement activists react to those responses, often starting a chain of events that produces something far different than anyone initially imagines.

We make a mistake when we imagine the outcomes of a social movement to be determined solely by the battle between organized activists and their opponents, focusing

exclusively on the moral passion, organization, or tactics of the movement. It's critical to examine social movement activism in a larger context that includes more conventional political efforts that activists provoke or encourage.

Demonstrators can stiffen the spine of would-be allies in government, suggesting there might be advantages in pressing for new positions on climate change, abortion, or gay marriage. (Politicians and other leaders often use social movements to "force" them to do what they want anyway.) No savvy politician will admit to changing direction in response to demonstrations in the street, but of course, it happens all the time.

When activists make progress, it's always less than what they want. The antiwar movement in the Vietnam era ultimately ended the draft, but the war dragged on. Immigrant rights and anti-immigration demonstrators stopped their opponents in 2005, battling to a stalemate that frustrated everyone. (Across Europe, advocates of immigration rights and opponents of immigration have mobilized, linking with allies in government to both welcome and to prohibit new immigrants.) People don't generally take to the streets looking for smaller reforms, but often it's only by asking for more that they get anything at all.

Social movements work through a variety of means, changing the lives and values of those who participate in them, establishing or altering organizations that coordinate them, effecting policy reforms, and influencing norms and culture. Demonstrators also signal to other citizens who might share their views that they are not alone, that things could be otherwise, and that they might be able to do something about it. The large national event that receives coverage in the national papers reflects hundreds of

smaller, less-visible actions and meetings in church basements and living rooms around the country, as people develop the temerity to think they can change the world. Sometimes they can.

Here's what's coming:

In chapter 1, we'll explore why movements emerge in the first place. Although saints and psychopaths may be so committed to a cause that they're ready to protest all the time, most people are concerned with the day-to-day business of managing their lives, their work, family, and friendships. Although activists are always trying to promote mobilization on the issues they care about, they only succeed sometimes, by convincing others that protest is possible, necessary, and potentially effective. Because large and powerful movements aren't a constant presence in most societies, we can't understand what works unless we make sense of why those movements only appear sometimes. In fact, the factors that invite or provoke movements also promote social change. Unlike the foolproof recipes offered in a cookbook, the success of different strategic and tactical recipes for action depends upon the context in which they're deployed.

Chapter 2 focuses on movements that attempt to launch revolutions, fighting not only particular policies, but the regime and rules that govern a state. There are far more revolutionary movements than revolutions that actually change a regime and try to overturn the basic rules and structures of power. But even when a movement succeeds in overthrowing and replacing a leader and imposing new structures of government, delivering on the promises of political change is extraordinarily difficult. Revolutionary movements, in which challengers seek to dislodge an oppressive regime through dramatic protest, create dramatic pictures and images that spur the imagination of

other activists. Translating the often courageous and moralistic protests in the streets to democratization and ultimate governance, however, is no easy task.

In order to effect influence, activists must mobilize a community beyond themselves, often a community that extends beyond their borders. In this century, new communication technologies allow activists to spread news of their ideas and activities around the world without depending upon mainstream networks. Revolutionary movements depend upon the support – or at least the quiescence – of foreign powers. We'll examine how movements communicate their efforts and their cause beyond their borders. We'll also look at the difficult politics of establishing new regimes, and how the translation of democratic dreams into functioning regimes reflects the networks and efforts that preceded the drama emerging from revolutionary movements.

In chapter 3, we will focus on states with democratic processes in place and functioning political institutions; social movements in those settings generally make narrower claims, using mainstream tactics and allies as well as protest to get what they want. We'll see how grievances create the opportunity for savvy organizers to build broad political coalitions and lodge effective claims. The challenge is that every reform can make it harder to maintain, much less build, a broad and concerned constituency for further change. More generally, government policies set the terms on which activists will challenge governments, and their success in lodging those challenges can undermine their basis for mobilization.

Activists protest when they think it might help them get what they want – and when they think they can't get it any other way. Such decisions are sometimes strategic and well-considered, and sometimes just a matter of habit.

Organizers successfully mobilize movements when they can convince people that the issue at hand is urgent, that positive outcomes are possible, and that their efforts could make a difference.

Democratic states are set up to channel discontent through the electoral process. Social movements face difficult choices in engaging in mainstream politics, because it always entails some degree of compromise. Depending upon the electoral structures in place, successful movements sometimes focus on particular candidates, while in other settings they can build protest parties. Social movements can use elections to influence policy by changing officials, that is, throwing the rascals out of office, and by changing minds, by threatening to throw the rascals out.

Social movements, by the popularity of their arguments, or more frequently, the strength of their support, can convince authorities to reexamine and possibly change their policy preferences. Movements can demand a litmus test for their support. Although movement activists promote specific policies – a nuclear freeze, an equal rights amendment, an end to legal abortion, or, more recently, a cap on malpractice awards – their demands are usually so absolute that they do not translate well into policy. (Placards and bumper stickers offer little space for nuanced debate.) Indeed, the clearest message that activists can generally send is NO. These absolutes rarely become policy, but by promoting their programs in stark moral terms, activists place the onus on others to offer alternative policies that are, depending on one's perspective, more moderate or complex. Politicians often use such alternatives to capture or at least defuse social movements.

Chapter 4 provides a closer look at the organizations that promote change in democratic states. Although the stories

that we remember about important movements of the past emphasize events, the movements of which they're a part are the result of purposeful organizing. The size, structure, and number of groups vary over time and across different settings, but we need to look at those groups to understand how they launch challenges, and how those challenges affect the groups as well as the larger society. In democratic states, protest movements are coordinated by established organizations that must seek to support themselves as well as advance their claims. Sometimes support can come from the government or political parties; sometimes, it comes from interested parties with their own commitments and agendas. Formal organizations provide a foundation for continued protest and making claims, but they also produce drag on the peak moments of mobilization. The establishment and maintenance of such organizations are outcomes of social movements that define part of institutionalization. The other venue for institutionalization is government. Social movements can build inroads into both the bureaucracy and mainstream politics to continue advancing their interests, often less visibly and more incrementally. We will see how the organizations underpinning social movements reflect and create different institutional structures.

Social movements can alter not only the substance of policy, but also how policy is made. Governments often create new institutions such as departments and agencies in response to activists' demands. Governments grow as they create bureaus for arms control, women, the environment, refugees, or civil rights. These offices become permanent institutional venues for responding to a set of issues and constituencies, even as those issues or constituencies first became visible through protest in the streets. Although these offices do not always support

activist goals, their very existence represents a permanent institutional concern and a venue for making demands.

Social movements also spawn dedicated organizations that generally survive well after a movement's moment has passed. The environmental movement, for example, firmly established a "big ten" group of national organizations, including the Sierra Club and the World Wildlife Fund, which survive primarily by raising money from self-defined environmentalists.⁶ They cultivate donors by monitoring and publicizing government action and environmental conditions, lobbying elected officials and administrators, and occasionally mobilizing their supporters to do something more than mail in their annual membership renewals. Here too, the seemingly permanent establishment of nongovernmental organizations around the world, even if these groups often lose, has fundamentally changed the process of making policy. Salaried officers of the organizations routinely screen high-level appointees to the judiciary and government bureaucracy and testify before legislatures. Mindful of this process, policymakers seek to preempt their arguments by modifying policy – or at least, rhetoric.

In chapter 5, we see how protest movements can change the trajectory of the lives of people who participate in them. Life in a movement can change the way individuals think about themselves, the friends they choose, the work they do, the food they eat, and certainly the way they think about politics. Activists in one movement go on to engage again and again in subsequent movements.

Broader movements also change culture by producing new symbols and values. In addition to changing policies, movements make new cultural productions that affect others who may never have been interested in politics. We can see art, music, and even food reflect particular social

movements. Changes in language can become artifacts of a movement, like the honorific “Ms.,” created with the express intent of changing the way people think about women and work.

Social movements also change the people who participate in them, educating as well as mobilizing activists. They promote ongoing awareness and action that extends beyond the boundaries of one movement or campaign. Those who turn out at antiwar demonstrations today have often cut their activist teeth mobilizing against globalization, on behalf of labor, for animal rights or against welfare reform. By politicizing communities, connecting people, and promoting personal loyalties, social movements build the infrastructure not only of subsequent movements, but of a democratic civil society more generally.

In chapter 6, we’ll look at how we understand the impact and influence of movements. Popular histories tell stories about movements (or omitting movements) that don’t necessarily line up with broadly understood facts. We tend to tell event and leader-centered stories that abbreviate the historical process of social change. This is understandable: brave leaders and dramatic events make for a better story than the much more difficult and time-consuming processes of changing the world. Activists have to work to recognize their influence, and then claim credit for it. Because movements never get exactly what they seek, and depend upon a host of outside factors to be influential, it’s easy to miss the impact of protest; moreover, the accuracy of a story isn’t the only factor that affects the acceptance of a story. A compelling account matters, as does the position of the person telling it. We will look at how the accepted understandings of the movements of the past affect the movements and activist campaigns that emerge in the future.

Notes

- 1 <http://www.disruptj20.org/tag/press/> (accessed January 26, 2018).
- 2 Most of those arrested refused to cooperate with police or prosecutors, choosing to face trial rather than negotiate plea agreements. After a jury acquitted the first six defendants of all charges, the federal prosecutor dropped charges against most of the remaining defendants. See Ryan J. Reilly, "Justice Department Drops Felony Charges Against 129 Trump Inauguration Defendants but 59 other #J20 protesters will face trial." *The Huffington Post*, January 18, 2018.
https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/j20-felony-charges_us_5a6122b4e4b074ce7a06d638 (accessed February 1, 2018).
- 3 Peta Australia, "Nearly Naked Peta Members to Take On Mercedes-Benz Fashion Festival for Refusing to Renounce Fur." <https://www.peta.org.au/media/nearly-naked-peta-members-to-take-on-mercedes-benz-fashion-festival-for-refusing-to-renounce-fur/> (accessed November 13, 2020).
- 4 Greenpeace International, "Actress Lucy Lawless joins climate change survivor in protest against Arctic exploitation for Norwegian oil." July 21, 2017.
<https://www.greenpeace.org/international/press-release/7449/actress-lucy-lawless-joins-climate-change-survivor-in-protest-against-arctic-exploitation-for-norwegian-oil/> (accessed November 13, 2020).
- 5 Marc Santora and Anna Schaverien, "Anti-Brexit Protesters Descend on London as Parliament Debates." *The New York Times*, October 19, 2019.

6 Deeohn Ferris, “Environmental Justice: Moving Equity from Margins to Mainstream.” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, August 15, 2019.

<https://nonprofitquarterly.org/environmental-justice-moving-equity-from-margins-to-mainstream/#:~:text=These%20are%3A%20Defenders%20of%20Wildlife,Society%2C%20and%20World%20Wildlife%20Fund> (accessed November 13, 2020).

CHAPTER 1

Why Movements Emerge and How They Work

Contemporary visitors to Boston can tour the Boston Tea Party Ships and Museum, and follow a guided tour of “the event that started a Revolution”¹ through a museum of the revolution, educated and entertained by actors who recreate heroic figures from America’s War of Independence. The tour ends with visitors mounting the deck of a replica of a colonial-era ship, throwing crates of tea over the side. Because the tour is pedagogical, rather than political, the crates, secured by ropes, don’t quite reach the waters of Boston Harbor. The boxes can be quickly retrieved so that the next visitor can enjoy the revolutionary experience.

The event holds an iconic place in American history. In the winter of 1773, colonists opposed to a selectively administered tax on tea – and British rule more generally – assembled by the harbor to stage a political protest. In the midst of his rally speech, rebel organizer Sam Adams signaled his supporters to act. Perhaps a hundred men who came prepared, costumed as Indians, screamed as they boarded the ships and began to throw tea over the side; they were joined by another hundred or so volunteers who had come to watch, but were inspired by the moment. More than 1,000 others watched, cheering the protesters on. Even in the drama of the moment, protesters were careful not to hurt anyone, nor to damage the ships (Griswold 1972).

The Boston Tea Party affected more than the next morning’s breakfast. Outraged and threatened, local police

arrested and punished a few of the vandals they could find. And in London, Parliament instituted a series of “Coercive Acts,” intended to punish the colonists, particularly in Massachusetts. Among other insults, Parliament shut down the Boston Harbor, until the colony could pay for the tea in the sea, imposed direct British rule on the colony, and provided for the quartering of British soldiers in Massachusetts. Patriots called the response “The Intolerable Acts.”

In the short run, the Tea Party looked like a bad idea. Colonists had long opposed taxes on tea, and had found a way around them, buying untaxed smuggled tea, some of it shipped by John Hancock, who was already a major political figure in Massachusetts. The tea that ended up in the harbor, which was to be sold by the East India Company, would actually have been sold at discount, even cheaper than the smuggled tea. The tax break offered by the Crown represented Britain’s attempt to boost the company’s failing fortunes. The protest, which destroyed their goods, didn’t help. Meanwhile, tea smugglers, whose businesses were threatened by the cheaper official tea, were among those supporting the Tea Party.

Over a slightly extended time frame, however, the Tea Party further polarized politics in the colonies, increasing pressure on people to take sides. Opposition to the Intolerable Acts created additional protests over the next year, and resistance led to the first Continental Congress, held in Philadelphia the following year. That Congress petitioned King George III to end the Intolerable Acts, declared a boycott of British goods, and scheduled a second Constitutional Congress – just in case the Crown didn’t respond to the petition. It didn’t. Resistance grew in the colonies, and armed conflict between the British military erupted in the Battles of Lexington and Concord in the Spring of 1775. Shortly thereafter, the second

Constitutional Congress convened, and that Congress eventually endorsed the Declaration of Independence and began to muster an armed resistance. Meanwhile, Thomas Paine (2019) published *Common Sense* in 1776, a series of pamphlets codifying and justifying the case for an independence movement. In this frame, the Tea Party was critical in setting into motion the events that culminated in American independence (Maier 1972).

So, we can tell a relatively coherent story in which the Tea Party was a catalyst for all that followed, including increased repression and provocation from the British, intensified organizing among the colonists both politically and militarily, and the cultivation of a liberal democratic ideology that supported an independence movement. But history didn't begin on that December night in Boston Harbor. The circumstances that give rise to dramatic protest events, and to social movements more generally, also contribute to the broader process of social change.

We might start by acknowledging that European colonization of the United States began more than 150 years before the Boston Tea Party, and the immigrants were mostly people who were unhappy with their lives under British rule. Generations grew up in America, with British governance only a distant force in the background most of the time. The colonists built local governments and businesses, and conducted their own commerce and conflicts with each other and with the Indigenous people already occupying the continent.

The conflicts that led to the Tea Party can be traced back nearly a decade before that dramatic confrontation. In seeking to finance both current wars and debt from previous wars, King George and Parliament sought to extract as much value from their colonies as possible, imposing taxes on virtually anything that might generate

revenue, starting with sugar, then adding glass, lead, paints, and paper. Britain imposed taxes on printed materials and imports generally. It also sought to exercise greater control over governance in the colonies, and maintained a large military presence in the New World. Parliament demanded that the colonists build barracks for the British soldiers and, failing that, to house them in stables, inns, and ale houses and, ultimately, in any vacant space. Parliament also held the colonists responsible for providing the funds to feed and support the British troops.

An organized resistance preceded the Tea Party. Virtually every provocation from Parliament generated a response. Political activists like Samuel Adams produced pamphlets and letters arguing that Parliament could not impose taxes on the colonies without their input. The arguments and letters circulated around the colonies, deepening the ties among the colonists, while building sympathy for the cause of independence. Britain responded with increased force; its efforts to squeeze the colonies all met with resistance, leading to the revocation of some laws, but also intensified conflict. In 1770, protest against the quartering of troops in Boston led to armed confrontation in the streets. In response to the colonists' harassment of soldiers, British soldiers opened fire on a crowd, resulting in the death of five colonists. There was a level of conflict, often violent and disruptive, that preceded and followed the more theatrical Tea Party, but the better choreographed event has an iconic place in narratives of American history that often edit out more violent events (Schiff 2020).

The point is that a decade of disruption preceded the Tea Party and the Revolution; speeches and pamphlets, intensified by long discussions in parliaments and taverns, occupied a far larger part of the process of building support than the drama of a costumed attack on commerce – even though the Tea Party makes a better story in a

history book. Over the period of growing resistance, support for British governance faded in the colonies, a response to both organizing in America and repeated incursions by the British. Efforts to deepen the ties among the colonies, which traced back at least 20 years before the Tea Party, gradually found greater support, as British policy gave the colonists a common enemy. To make sense of the growth of the independence movement and the Tea Party in particular, we need to understand the context in which it developed.

I don't mean here to provide a comprehensive account of the American Revolution; rather, I want to use this movement to point out the necessity of putting any movement effort in a broader historical and political context. From the example of the Tea Party, we can identify factors that are critical to the emergence, organization, and impact of any significant social movement.

We want to recognize that most people don't protest most of the time. Although a few committed organizers are virtually always trying to recruit others to their causes, most people think about their personal commitments and aspirations far more than they attend to larger issues of social change. Movements grow and gain the potential of influence when they engage large numbers of people who would otherwise be consumed with work, family and friends, and the pressures and possibilities of everyday life. Protest and political engagement come with some cost, and we have to pay attention to the circumstances under which people will take on the extra work of trying to change their world, rather than just live in it. Most people add social movement participation to their agendas only when they think that something's wrong, it's fixable, and that protest might matter.

Social Movements, Events, and Political Context

The world outside a movement is critical to how much that movement can grow, and we can think about that world as offering a set of *political opportunities* (McAdam 1982; Meyer 2004; Tarrow 2011; Tilly 1978). Potential participants in a social movement look at the world around them when they decide how to respond to an invitation to act. They need to believe that a cause is actionable, and that it's possible – or safe enough – to join with others (Gamson and Meyer 1996). No matter how good an organizer is, what's going on in the rest of the world makes it easier or harder to sell his or her message.

Back to the American Revolution: Separated from colonial rule by the Atlantic Ocean, colonists enjoyed the space to do more than a little self-governance. Over time, they built wealth, organizations, and identities that were not exactly “British.” When England began to impose greater restrictions on the colonists’ business and autonomy, it created shared grievances in America, and those grievances contributed to the development of a distinct American identity. Colonists aggrieved by new taxes or restrictions on participation in governance initially tried to resist them; essentially, the first efforts were conservative ones, trying to keep things as they were. When this proved increasingly difficult, support for independence grew as the most viable alternative.

Political opportunities also include the means available to try to advance one’s political interests, and vary for different racial, professional, and class groups, over time, and across different contexts (Bracey 2015). Most people are unlikely to protest if they think they can get what they want by employing more modest means that entail less cost

and less risk. Advocates experiment with different ways of getting what they want: writing letters, making speeches, organizing demonstrations, staging theatrical acts of vandalism, and ultimately, in this case, taking up arms and going to war. In the case of the American independence cause, there's an interaction between social movements and the authorities they challenge – as is always the case in protest movements. When Britain punished the colonists and excluded them from normal institutional politics, it could have crushed the cause altogether; instead, it drove them to war as the best available alternative.

Some of the most educated and affluent people in the colonies were already familiar with philosophical arguments against monarchy, and the beginnings of a liberal philosophy of limited government (Wills 1978), but then, as now, relatively few people find the time to work their way through books of philosophy. As the cause of independence grew, however, Patriots developed ways to translate and promote their ideas to a broader public. A free press circulated work from advocates of independence. Most notably, Thomas Paine, newly arrived in America in 1774, promoted ideas of independence and human rights as “Common Sense” in 1776. The coincidence of the right text with a critical time produced a national bestseller, and gave the Patriots a script to justify their organizing efforts.

Ultimately, the colonists won a war of independence, but the ideas and the organizations inspired citizens of the new nation to demand more. Even as the revolution moved the locus of governance from London to colony capitals, the United States allowed slavery, the continued expansion to Indian territories, and some states did little of consequence to advance the interests of most of their citizens. Farmers in western Massachusetts, seized with the revolutionary spirit, in 1786 armed themselves and occupied a courthouse to protest the difficulties they had in paying

debt owed to creditors who mostly controlled the legislature. Shays' Rebellion helped provoke the Constitutional convention, which strengthened the federal government and made it even more difficult for farmers to get credit on the terms they wanted (Richards 2002). The Constitution also left some supporters of the revolution disappointed or angry. Farmers on the western edge of the early United States, accustomed to distilling their surplus grain for personal use and for sale, resisted a federal tax on domestically produced spirits. Beginning in 1791, recalling the principle of fighting "taxation without representation," the Whiskey Rebellion included tax evasion, mass meetings and demonstrations, and physical assaults on tax collectors (Slaughter 1986). President Washington led a militia of 13,000 men to put down the rebellion, buttressing the new republic at the expense of the vision of many of those who fought for it.

Telescoping out from the Boston Tea Party, we encounter the complications in making an assessment of the influence of social movements. Even a simple reading of the event must situate it in a larger independence movement that, over a period of years, produced a war and a new nation. Even then, evaluating that movement as a success means neglecting the lofty aspirations and concrete expectations of many of those who turned out for the effort. For these reasons, the Tea Party provides a good way to start examining how social movements matter. The Tea Party and the larger American Revolution of which it was a part was a distinct series of events, whose outcomes were defined by context and contingency. Nonetheless, we can use it to establish and define concepts that will be helpful in understanding a wide range of other campaigns in a broad variety of contexts.

Elements of Political Protest

“Social movement” is something of a catch-all term, designating organized and sustained challenges to some kind of authority. Movements are comprised of groups and individuals who share some common aims, but also differ on issues of ultimate goals, as well as the best ways to achieve them. Movements include ideas and actions, which generally play out both in mainstream politics and outside the mainstream. A movement links discrete events, like demonstrations, meetings, and speeches, over an extended period of time. Using movements, organizers aspire to change both the world outside them and the ways in which participants live their lives (Meyer 2014). Inherently unstable, movements can grow into revolutionary campaigns, where insurgents seek to control territory and displace a governing regime. They may also develop into more routine political organizations and practices, in which organizers make accommodations with authorities and pursue their interests in less disruptive ways.

A *grievance* is a source of dissatisfaction that activists view to be actionable. Unpleasant cold temperatures on a winter’s day may be frustrating, but people don’t see collective action as a route to redress. Individuals can bundle up, go inside, or just shiver. In contrast, growing belief that a practice or policy could be fixed leads people to unite with others and take purposeful action. The grievance can be one that potential recruits already know, but don’t view as either wrong or changeable, like female genital mutilation, wages, work conditions, or racial or religious segregation. In such cases, organizers have the job of suggesting alternatives, and giving their would-be supporters a sense that change is possible. Part of the process involves showing people that the issues they face aren’t peculiar to them; that a problem is collective, not personal.