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Course at the University of Washington, Spring 2016  
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Social Movements and Political Protest. An Introduction to and Critical Analysis of the Theoretical Perspectives  
SOC581A, Wednesdays, 3:30 pm to 5:20 pm, Sieg Hall (SIG) 229  
Download syllabus and readings from dropbox: http://tinyurl.com/OppReadingsUW2016

I. Idea of the Seminar and Procedure

Idea. This course will provide a critical introduction to and comparison of the most important theoretical perspectives that explain the emergence, stability and decline of social movements and protest participation. The purpose is thus not a detailed description of the development of major social movements, but a critical discussion of the existing explanations.

Most theoretical perspectives begin with an article, a book chapter, or a book. Our discussion in class begins with a critical analysis of this basic literature of a theoretical approach. In a next step, we will look at the further development of the respective approach. The following questions will be addressed for each theoretical perspective: (1) What are its propositions? If they are not clear: how could they be formulated more precisely? (2) What are the problems of the propositions? In particular: (2a) What kind of information do they provide and not provide, i.e. what is their explanatory value)? (2b) To what extent are the propositions tested and confirmed? What could be situations where they may not hold true (i.e. what are plausible falsifications)? (2c) How does the perspective discussed differ from the perspectives discussed in previous sessions? Thus, the class will not only provide a simple description of each theoretical perspective (who wrote what?), but offers a critical discussion and a comparison.

My book from 2009 is based on this idea as well: Opp, Karl-Dieter. 2009. Theories of Political Protest and Social Movements. A Multidisciplinary Introduction, Critique and Synthesis. London and New York: Routledge. The book provides a detailed discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the existing theoretical perspectives about social movements and political protest, and a suggestion for a synthesis (the “structural-cognitive model” which will be discussed in class – see below). Some of the required readings for this class are discussed in the book as well. However, I would strongly recommend NOT reading the chapters before discussion of the readings in class, but after the discussion. So you should read the original articles and not just a summary provided in the book. AND you should think about strengths and weaknesses yourself in the very first place, and only then read the discussion in the book.

Procedure. For each session, one to three students (depending on the size of the class) should lead the discussion for about an hour (at least). The student or students should (1) begin with a brief overview of the required readings – “brief” means a maximum of 10 minutes, not longer! –, (2) prepare questions to be discussed in class (ideally, the list of questions could be e-mailed to all of us a day or two before class), (3) explore the "additional readings" if the "required readings" do not suffice to find enough questions (note that the additional readings are ordered according to the importance for the respective theme), and (4) lead the discussion. (5) I recommend that the discussion leaders meet with me at least one day before class to go through the questions, but this is only a recommendation.

The required readings will be available as pdf-files.

Regular attendance (and participation in the discussion) and a paper, to be turned in by the end of May are – in addition to being discussion leader in a session – other requirements for a
grade (for details see below section V). You may choose any theme that is related to political protest and social movements. You should prepare a one-page outline of your theme and talk to me by the end of April.

It goes without saying that each participant has read the "required readings" that are listed below for each topic and comes to class with some critical questions that can be discussed, in addition to those prepared by the discussion leader or leaders. I would also ask you to bring the printouts of the required readings to class so that they can be discussed in detail.

II. General Readings
There are several textbooks about social movements and political protest. I only list two recent books that present and discuss the major theories about the emergence and effects of social movements and political protest (see also the book by Opp in part I of the syllabus):


The following book is not a textbook but presents many hypotheses and good discussions of theories about social movements and political protest:


This is a detailed exposition and critique of the theory of collective action and of deprivation theories.

There are two readers that include important work on the subject:

**McAdam, Doug, and David A. Snow (Eds.). 1997. Social Movements. Readings in Their Emergence, Mobilization, and Dynamics.** Los Angeles: Roxbury.


There are two journals that publish work on social movements, political protest and conflict:

**Mobilization and Social Movement Studies.**

III. Explaining Social Movements and Political Protest

1. Introduction
The following topics will be discussed in the first session: (1) Discussion of the syllabus. (2) How to criticize a theory? (3) Conceptual problems: how to define "social movement" and "political protest"? You may look at Opp 2009 (see above), pp. 1-32.
2. The Theory of Collective Action

Required readings: Olson, Mancur. 1965. *The Logic of Collective Action*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, pp. 1-65. (If you have problems with the mathematical part, read only the nontechnical summary.)


Additional readings I:
The following paper by Ferree provides a sharp critique of rational choice theory that underlies the theory of collective action. What version of rational choice theory is attacked? For the different versions see below Opp 1999.


NOTE: The previous two articles discuss the influence of modern communication technology on collective action – from the perspective of Olson’s theory.

Additional readings II:


Press. This article discusses a Rational Choice explanation of collective action in comparison to alternative explanations.


3. Two Applications of the Theory of Collective Action


Additional readings:


There are many other applications, those mentioned before seem to me particularly recommendable.

4. The Resource Mobilization Perspective


Additional readings:


5. **The Political Opportunity Structure Perspective**


Additional readings:


6. Identity and Political Participation

**Required readings:**


**Additional readings:**


Huddy, Leonie. 2001. "From Social to Political Identity. A Critical Examination of Social


The papers by Huddy and Brubaker are critical reviews of identity theory.


7. Framing and Political Participation


Additional readings:


8. The Dynamics of Contention as a Synthesis of the Approaches


Additional readings:


See the special issue of Mobilization from 2011, vol. 16, no. 1 – with further references.


This is a theme for two sessions. We will first discuss a synthesis of the approaches – the “Structural-Cognitive Model” (SCM) – that differs from the synthesis the “Dynamics of Contention” seeks to provide. What are the differences between these syntheses?

We will then discuss a test of the SCM. The third theme is the application of the SCM and of the previous approaches to a specific case: the emergence of the protests in Leipzig in 1989 and the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Required readings:


**Opp.** Karl-Dieter, Peter Voss, and Christiane Gern. 1995. *The Origins of a Spontaneous*

**Other applications:** I hope that some of you take as a subject for a paper one of the most recent movements and protests. Examples: tea party, occupy wall street, the Arab Spring (protests in Bahrein, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Syria, Tunesia, Yemen), protests in Russia 2011 (after elections in the fall of 2011). We could speculate about possible explanations. **Who wants to present some ideas?** Some material can be found in:  

**Additional readings:**

**V. Requirements for Grades**

A paper of about 20 pages is a requirement for getting a grade, in addition to regular attendance (that means presence at least in eight sessions), and being a discussion leader.

You may choose any theme that refers to social movement and political protest. Here are some suggestions. (1) A discussion of the old deprivation and relative deprivation theories, from the perspective of the theory of collective action (or of another theoretical perspective). (2) The "collective behavior" tradition from the perspective of the theory of collective action (or of other theoretical perspectives). (3) One of the theories discussed in class can be applied to explain the emergence or decline of an existing social movement or of a protest group (or of a movement or protest groups from the past). Examples are the environmental, peace, antinuclear, Anti-Vietnam, feminist and student movements, and protest groups like mothers against drunk driving, the Chinese student movement in 1989, the East European protests in 1989/1990, the “Arab spring” a year ago, the protests in Russia in 2011. Suggestion: Don’t try to explain the rise and decline of a whole movement - this is too much for a term paper; select certain events or periods of the
development of a movement, e.g. how it came into being or why it declined. (4) Another possibility is to provide a critical review of the empirical confirmation or falsification of a theoretical perspective. If you have other ideas, let me know.

You should choose the topic of your paper by the end of April - please, come to my office. The paper should be finished by the end of May.