

Poor people's movements

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Poor people's movements describes contentious collective actors that are considered to be particularly powerless or weak in resources compared to other members of a community. Often, the term is used to describe spontaneous mass protest by members of social groups that are at the lower end of a socioeconomic scale or in a particularly marginalized position in a society, such as the homeless or the unemployed. Research into poor people's movements has shown, however, that these movements share similar organizational efforts and coordinated social action to other movement activity. This entry examines the shared characteristics of these movements, how studies of poor people's movements over the past decades have changed, and the insights we have gained from studies on social movement activity of the poor for social movement theory.

Poor people's movements are episodic and rare phenomena compared to other movements. Research into poor people's movements points to the crucial role of the local roots of these movements and the importance of disruptive actions to compensate for the lack of power of the participants (Piven & Cloward 1977). In fact, disruptive repertoires are stored within local and often informal organizational networks. Poor people's movements are often characterized, as well, by a particular tension between social service activities and political (protest) action.

Historical examples of poor people's movements include the protest by the unemployed and the working class during the New Deal in the US. In the second half of the twentieth century the protest of welfare recipients in the 1960 and 1970s (Piven & Cloward 1977) and the protest of the homeless during the 1980s in the US (Cress & Snow 1996) are well-known

examples of poor people's protest. In Europe, protest of the unemployed is both commonplace and pervasive across the region (Chabanet & Royall 2010).

More recent studies have stressed the marginal position of social groups within society that are not necessarily first and foremost economically disadvantaged. These empirical investigations broaden understanding of what is conceived as poor people's movements. For example, in France in the mid-1990s a movement of the have-nots (*mouvement de sans*) gathered homeless people, migrants, and unemployed. While belonging to the group of migrants or the unemployed means a higher risk of being poor, it is not necessarily the case. These groups are instead mainly characterized by their marginal position in society. The term poor people's movements can therefore point to two distinct aspects: either to the fact that the protest is carried by the economically poor, or to the fact that the carriers of a protest are particularly powerless or are weak in resources. The latter and broader understanding has gained in importance over the last two decades.

In fact, the term poor people's movement is sometimes used as an analytical focus rather than just describing an empirical phenomenon or a specific movement. For example, the civil rights movement of black Americans was often described as a poor people's movement, but it pertained more broadly to black Americans in general. Similarly, the civil rights movement played an important role in relation to the welfare rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s in the US (see Piven & Cloward 1977).

In the tradition of Marxian analysis, poor people's movements were often explained by social and economic inequalities. The social tensions and experienced grievances would politicize members of the disadvantaged social groups and lead to the outburst of protest actions. The social and political meaning of these movements – that is, their

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supposed critique of the social and political architecture – was therefore often highlighted.

History has often told us a different story, however. Movement research of the past decades has shown that protest by the poor is rather the exception than the rule. In fact, grievances do not simply translate into protest. Also, these movements rarely have a revolutionary impetus or question society as a whole, but often point, instead, to specific weaknesses of the political system. Further, other actors, such as the Global Justice Movement, sometimes take up the role of advocating for interests of the poor. While variants of strain theory may add to our understanding of how and when poor people's movements emerge, there seems to be no automatic and direct link between socioeconomic grievances and protest on issues of social and economic inequality.

During the later part of the twentieth century poor people's protest was comparatively infrequent. In postwar Europe and the US, protest action was much more often carried out by members of the middle class who had more privileged access to resources necessary to organize protest action. These protest movements, summarized in the European context as the "new social movements," seemed to dominate the movement landscape. New social movements no longer formulated social claims in line with former movements – the expression of class-based actors expressing their socioeconomic position – but as actors seeking new collective identities beyond their class position (feminist movement, peace movement, environmental movement). Whereas in the US context movements of the poor were more common, especially in relation to welfare rights and homelessness, in postwar Europe poor people's movements were relatively rare for many decades.

Social movement researchers have offered various explanations as to why poor people infrequently organized collectively or found it difficult to do so. On the individual level it is argued that poor people are often socially isolated and lack important networks to get

politically involved. Further, poor people are assumed to have a difficult time accessing the resources necessary to organize collective protest action. Also the welfare state was assumed to defuse social protest topics. The difficulty of constructing and maintaining a positive collective identity, while belonging to an often ascribed and stigmatized identity, has also been considered as a major obstacle to building a movement of the poor. Unemployed people, for example, often refuse to describe themselves as belonging to the group of the unemployed, as do some of the homeless. The observations, considered together, underscore the difficulty of sustained mobilization among the poor.

These observations notwithstanding, over the past two decades protest by the poor has attracted increased interest. In the US, valuable empirical research had been done on the homeless movements, while in Europe the main focus of the past 15 years was on the mobilization of the unemployed. Research on poor people's movements has furthered our understanding of social movement activism by refining the concept of resources, the role of networks for movement activity, and the importance of a shared, collective identity. The research has also shown the importance of benefactor organizations for poor people's movements, without dismissing the fact that some poor organizations create resources from scratch or importantly rely on individual resources. Further, research into poor people's movements has stressed the role of countercultural networks for disruptive action of the poor. Often oscillating between social services activities and political protest, poor people's movements sometime blur the distinction between social and political action. Finally, research has shown that access to informal organizations seems to be especially crucial for poor people's movements, as these movements produce fewer written accounts than their richer counterparts.

SEE ALSO: Civil rights movement (United States); Homeless protest movements (United States); Marxism and social movements; Peasant

movements; Recyclable materials collectors movement in Brazil and South America; Resource mobilization theory; Squatters' movements; Strain and breakdown theories; Unemployment movements.

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