



# Four Stages of Social Movements

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the four stages of social movements. The four stages of social movement development are emergence, coalescence, bureaucratization, and decline. The Decline stage can result from several different causes, such as repression, co-optation, success, failure, and mainstream. The four stages of development model can be applied to understand how movements form, grow, and dissipate. It has limitations, however, in its application to new social movements and movements that are not rooted in political action. Despite these limitations, the four stages model is still highly useful in understanding collective action and provides a useful frame of analysis for sociologists considering social movements and their effects in the past and present.

## Overview

There have been many social movements throughout history that have dramatically changed the societies in which they occurred. There have been many failed social movements as well. Throughout the history of the United States alone there have been a number of important and notable social movements. These movements have varied widely in their ideologies; some movements have been revolutionary in their aims, some have advocated reforms to the existing system, and others still have been conservative in their orientation and have worked to oppose changes in society. Social movements have varied in scope as well. For example, many movements are limited to local policies while others have been international in their focus. Despite all of the differences in social movements though, there are important analytic similarities that sociologists have distinguished, especially with regard to the life cycle of a social movement.

Because social movements have led to so many dramatic changes in societies around the globe, scholars have spent a great deal of time trying to understand where they come from, who participates in them, how they succeed, and how they fail. Much of what they have discovered is that social movements do not just happen; they require many resources and have many stages through which they develop. In other words, people do not simply suddenly become upset with a policy or even a ruling system and then instantly form a social movement with a coherent ideology that is capable of holding mass demonstrations or overthrowing an existing power structure. Instead, social movements grow through four stages.

## Abstract

An explanation of what defines a social movement is followed by a description of the development and theory of the model of

## Keywords

**Bureaucratization**

**Coalescence**

**Collective Action**

**Co-optation**

**Decline**

**Emergence**

**Encapsulation**

**Extra-institutional**

**Factionalism**

**Mass Society Theory**

**New Social Movements**

**Repression**

**Social Movements**

**Social Movement Organization (SMO)**

**Social Movement Abeyance**

Examining these stages of social movements has enabled sociologists to better understand social movements in general, despite variances in movement ideology and scope.

### What is a Social Movement?

Defining what, exactly, a social movement is can be difficult. It is not a political party or interest group, which are stable political entities that have regular access to political power and political elites; nor is it a mass fad or trend, which are unorganized, fleeting and without goals. Instead they are somewhere in between (Freeman & Johnson, 1999). Some characteristics of social movements are that they are “involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents; are linked by dense informal networks; [and they] share a distinct collective identity” (De la Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 20). Social movements, then, can be thought of as organized yet informal social entities that are engaged in extra-institutional conflict that is oriented towards a goal. These goals can be either aimed at a specific and narrow policy or be more broadly aimed at cultural change.

To early scholars, collective action was inherently oriented towards change. Some of the earliest works on social movements were attempts to understand why people got caught up in collective action or what conditions were necessary to foment social movements. These works were rooted in theories of mass

society. Mass society theory was concerned with the increasing industrialization of society, which many felt led to a sense of alienation among individuals as traditional social structures and support networks broke down. The study of social movements as specific social processes with specific patterns emerged from this field of study.

### Four Stages of Social Movements

One of the earliest scholars to study social movement processes was Herbert Blumer, who identified four stages of social movements' lifecycles. The four stages he described were: “social ferment,” “popular excitement,” “formalization,” and “institutionalization” (De la Porta & Diani 2006, p.150). Since his early work, scholars have refined and renamed these stages but the underlying themes have remained relatively constant. Today, the four social movement stages are known as:

- Emergence,
- Coalescence,
- Bureaucratization, and
- Decline.

Although the term decline may sound negative, it should not necessarily be understood in negative terms. Scholars have noted that social movements may decline for several reasons and have identified five ways they do decline. These are

- Success,
- Organizational failure,
- Co-optation,
- Repression, or
- Establishment within mainstream society (Macionis, 2001; Miller, 1999).

#### Stage 1: Emergence

The first stage of the social movement life cycle is known as the emergence, or, as described by Blumer, the “social ferment” stage (De la Porta & Diani, 2006). Within this stage, social movements are very preliminary and there is little to no organization. Instead this stage can be thought of as widespread discontent (Macionis, 2001; Hopper, 1950). Potential movement participants may be unhappy with some policy or some social condition, but they have not taken any action in order to redress their grievances, or if they have it is most likely individual action rather than collective action. A person may comment to friends and family that he or she is dissatisfied with conditions or may write a letter to the local newspaper or representative, but these actions are not strategic and not collective. Further, there may be an increase in media coverage of negative conditions or unpopular policies which contributes to the general sense of discontent.

This early stage can also be considered within a specific social movement organization (SMO). A social movement organization is an organization that is or has been associated with a social

movement and which carries out the tasks that are necessary for any social movement to survive and be successful. An example of a social movement organization is the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which was one of the many social movement organizations that organized during the American Civil Rights Movement. Within the emergence stage, then, an SMO and its members serve as agitators. Agitators raise consciousness around issues and help to develop the sense of discontent among the general population.

An example of this stage would be the early 1950's for the Civil Rights Movement. There was, of course, among the African-American population in the South, a general and long standing sense of discontent. Further, there were SMOs such as the NAACP that provided agitation, but were not yet organizing the mass and continued actions that came to later characterize the Civil Rights Movement. It was not until after the *Brown v. the Board of Education* Supreme court decision (1954), which outlawed segregation in Public schools, and following the arrest of Rosa Parks in Montgomery, Alabama for refusing to comply with segregation laws on city buses by giving up her bus seat to a white man, that the American Civil Rights Movement would proceed to the next stage – coalescence.

### Stage 2: Coalescence

At this next stage in the life cycle, social movements have overcome some obstacles which many never overcome. Often, social unrest or discontent passes without any organizing or widespread mobilization. For example, people in a community may complain to each other about a general injustice, but they do not come together to act on those complaints and the social movement does not progress to the next level. Stage two, known as coalescence, or the “popular stage,” is characterized by a more clearly defined sense of discontent. It is no longer just a general sense of unease, but now a sense of what the unease is about and who or what is responsible. Rex D. Hopper (1950), in examining revolutionary processes, states that at this stage “unrest is no longer covert, endemic, and esoteric; it becomes overt, epidemic, and exoteric. Discontent is no longer uncoordinated and individual; it tends to become focalized and collective” (p. 273). Further he states “this is the stage when individuals participating in the mass behavior of the preceding stage become aware of each other” (p. 273). At this point leadership emerges and strategies for success are worked out. Also, at this stage mass demonstrations may occur in order to display the social movement's power and to make clear demands. Most importantly this is the stage at which the movement becomes more than just random upset individuals; at this point they are now organized and strategic in their outlook.

The American Civil Rights Movement again provides a good example. After the initial emergence, the movement began a series of high profile campaigns, which sought to highlight the plight of African Americans in the segregated South. These campaigns included the Montgomery Bus Boycott and lunch counter sit-ins in which black students would sit down at seg-

regated counters and wait to either be served or be dragged out by the police. These events galvanized support for the movement and displayed the brutality to which white segregationists would resort in order to protect the status quo. At this point too, prominent leaders of the movement begin to emerge, such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. After many years of successful, but hard fought campaigns and strong leadership, the movement became a more prominent political force.

### Stage 3: Bureaucratization

The third stage is known as bureaucratization. This stage, defined by Blumer as “formalization,” (De la Porta & Diani, 2006) is characterized by higher levels of organization and coalition-based strategies. In this stage, social movements have had some success in that they have raised awareness to a degree that a coordinated strategy is necessary across all of the SMOs. Similarly, SMOs will come to rely on staff persons with specialized knowledge that can run the day-to-day operations of the organization and carry out movement goals. Social movements in this stage can no longer just rely on mass rallies or inspirational leaders to progress towards their goals and build constituencies; they must rely on trained staff to carry out the functions of organizations. In this phase their political power is greater than in the previous stages in that they may have more regular access to political elites. Many social movements fail to bureaucratize in this way and end up fizzling out because it is difficult for members to sustain the emotional excitement necessary and because continued mobilization becomes too demanding for participants. Formalization often means that paid staff can fill in when highly enthusiastic volunteers are not readily available (Macionis, 2001; Hopper, 1950).

The gay rights movement is an example of a movement that has passed through this stage. The gay rights movement moved from agitation and demonstrations to having many formal organizations that now work toward the goals of the gay rights movement. Some of these organizations include the Human Rights Campaign and the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Discrimination (GLAAD). If they did not form these bureaucratic organizations, many movements would have most likely faded away and their demands would have gone unmet.

### Stage 4: Decline

Finally, the last stage in the social movement life cycle is decline, or “institutionalization.” Decline does not necessarily mean failure for social movements though. Instead, Miller (1999) argues, there are four ways in which social movements can decline:

- Repression,
- Co-optation,
- Success, and
- Failure,

Others have added establishment with mainstream as another way in which they decline (Macionis, 2001).

## Repression

The first way social movements can decline is through repression. Repression occurs when authorities, or agents acting on behalf of the authorities, use measures (sometimes violent) to control or destroy a social movement. Further, Miller (1999) states “repressive actions may be defined as legitimate by the state...but they are never legitimate from the perspective of the movement” (p. 305). This means that governments will often pass laws outlawing specific movement activities or organizations, or justify attacks on them by declaring them somehow dangerous to public order. This type of repression makes it exceedingly difficult for social movements to carry out their activities and recruit new members. An example of state repression of social movement activity is that which was carried out by U.S. authorities against many New Left Organizations in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many movements and their leaders were spied upon, jailed and even killed as a part of this repressive effort, leading to eventual break up (Boren, 2001; Churchill & Wall, 1990; Miller, 1999).

## Co-optation

Movements can also decline, if their organizations are highly dependent on centralized authority or on charismatic leadership, through co-optation. Co-optation occurs when movement leaders come to associate with authorities or movement targets more than with the social movement constituents. For example, a leader could be asked to work for the organization that is the target of a movement with offers of being able to change things from the inside. Instead they themselves become integrated into the organization and take on its values, rather than the social movement’s values. Leaders could also be paid off by authorities or target groups who ask them to redirect their activities in exchange.

## Success

Of course, not all social movements end in defeat through repression or co-optation; some decline because they are successful. Smaller, localized movements with very specific goals often have a better chance at outright success. Miller (1999) uses the example of an area that mobilizes to halt the construction of an airport. He also mentions that the women’s suffrage movement was a national organization that achieved its goals and thus declined. Both of these examples point to movements with very specific goals. Many social movements have goals that are much less clearly defined and many organize new campaigns once others are wrapping up either through success or compromise.

Miller (1999) suggests that this is what happened to Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which was a student organization that emerged in the early 1960s and represented much of the ideology of the emerging student and youth movements of the time. They were one of the largest youth based organizations that organized protests against the Vietnam War and for school democratization. Many of its members participated in the early 1960’s Civil Rights struggles and were influenced by that struggle (McAdam, 1988; Miller, 1999). Miller argues that an ever expanding definition of success and radicalization of members of SDS led to the decline of the movement itself. He suggests that the rapid growth and expansion

of SDS led to these changing orientations. He argues, then, that their success was part of their demise.

An example of a group that re-orientes toward new goals once old goals are achieved is the organization, the March of Dimes. The March of Dimes originally formed in the late 1930s as a movement to raise awareness of and work towards curing the disease polio. Once a vaccine for polio was developed in the late 1950s though, the movement re-oriented to advocate toward the more general goals of preventing birth defects, premature birth and infant mortality.

## Failure

In his analysis of the decline of SDS, Miller (1999) notes that SDS declined for many of the reasons stated above, but he also argues that the organization was not able to handle the rapid expansion that occurred because of their success and due to organizational strain, it collapsed into different factions. Failure of social movements due to organizational or strategic failings is common for many organizations. When failure occurs at the organizational level, Miller argues, it is usually for two reasons: factionalism and encapsulation.

As SDS grew, and partly due to its open structure in which everybody was encouraged to take part in the decision making process, the organization began to be controlled by different factions that were operating within the organization for the benefit of outside organizations – in the case of SDS they were dealing with the increasing power of the Progressive Labor Party faction. As the factionalism grew worse and repression continued, Miller argues that groups became increasingly insular, leading to encapsulation. This is the process wherein a cadre of activists become isolated from the broader movement because they come to share many of the same habits and culture and their ideology becomes more similar to one another’s and at the same time more rigid. They become so dedicated to the movement that they fail to sympathize with those who do not make the movement the dominant aspect of their life. Likewise, potential recruits find it hard to penetrate the close knit group (Miller, 1999).

## Establishment with Mainstream

Others have noted that a fifth reason for decline exists; mainly, that an organization becomes established with the mainstream. That is, their goals or ideologies are adopted by the mainstream and there is no longer any need for a movement. An example of this would be the labor movement in the United States. For many years the labor movement was brutally repressed by authorities, but today the U.S. labor movement is well integrated into the political and economic system. Collective bargaining rights are guaranteed by the federal government (in most cases) and the labor movement is well established within the political system (Macionis, 2001).

## Applications

Sociologists can use the theory of the four stages of social movements as an analytic tool for understanding how collective action

occurs. Since social movements vary so greatly in individual goals and appearance, it can be helpful to place them within a common framework in order to determine how social movements affect society on a wide scale.

Sociologists, as well as potential social movement leaders and participants, can also use the four stages to evaluate the strategies of a specific social movement, and whether they were effective or not. For example, movements in the coalescence stage can anticipate the need to advance into the next level of development, bureaucratization, and can act accordingly to increase their power and influence. In addition, close consideration of the various modes of decline for social movements can help current social movements avoid the outcomes of co-optation and failure, and perhaps better position themselves for success.

The four stages of social movement development can also help scholars understand the ways that social movements affect society. By analyzing social movements that occur at given points and stages, sociologists can gain insight into the workings of society and the changes it undergoes - a fundamental component to the work of sociologists. For example, looking at the periods of emergence and coalescence in the American Civil Rights Movements presents a way to observe how society has changed as a result of the movement. In addition, we can better understand the events that occur at various stages in the social movement in retrospect as part of a process or change, rather than as individual events.

## Viewpoints

While the theory of the four stages of social movements offers some useful insight into some movements, it has limitations as well. Some of the limitations are a result of the organizational emphasis and a preoccupation with political change. Social movements with clearly defined political complaints and goals tend to fit well into the model, but other types of social movements present some problems. Social movements also emerge in response to cultural and social issues, and these movements do not fit as easily into the stages of development.

Social movement theory has increasingly moved toward examining new social movements, or movements that have emerged since the 1960s around issues of identity and quality of life (Inglehart, 1990; Melucci, 1995). Many also tend to emphasize social changes in lifestyle instead of specific changes in public policy or for economic change. For example, the Slow Food movement advocates in opposition to the fast-food lifestyle that members find unhealthy and unsustainable. The movement encourages lifestyle changes and altered consumer habits on an individual level, but it does not seek to outlaw fast-food or affect a specific policy change. Instead, the movement argues for a cumulative effect on society as a result of the movements' members' individual actions.

Social movements may not develop through the stages as described, or they may skip stages altogether. Generally, most movements do reach the stage of coalescence, since it is at that point that we begin to see behavior that we define as a social movement. Yet the

movement may never grow beyond this second stage, and members may never develop into formal organizations. Some social movements consciously choose to reject bureaucratization for ideological reasons. This is particularly more prevalent as technology increases, making movement members able to communicate and engage with the movement through internet websites without formal groups ever coming together.

The four stages of social movements can be too rigidly applied as well. It is important to consider that the stages of development are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and that a movement could in fact move backwards at points. For example, the social movement organization SDS underwent a period of decline in the 1970s, but in the early 2000s saw a re-emergence. The contemporary SDS organizes around similar principles and draws upon the existing structure of SDS after the group had already undergone the fourth stage of decline. Another condition unaddressed by the four stages is the state of social movement abeyance, in which a movement temporarily ceases outreach and mass mobilization in order to focus on maintaining identity and values (Taylor 1989; Meyers & Sawyers, 1999).

Sociologist Charles Tilly (1999) pointed out that "the employment of invariant models...assumes a political world in which whole structures and sequences repeat themselves time after time in essentially the same form. That would be a convenient world for theorists, but it does not exist" (as quoted in Giugni, 1999, p. xxv). Thus, while the analytic uses of the four stages may work to an extent, it is also important consider that each movement is responding to specific social conditions that affect the outcome and development of the social movement.

## Conclusion

Social movements continue to be a major force in the world. Sociologists provide important analysis of social movements that helps us to understand both past and present societies, as well as to anticipate changes and trends that may play out in the future. As new movements develop, they can learn from the investigation of prior movements' experience to better prepare for future possibilities. The model of analysis provided by the theory of the four stages of social movements is an important aspect in the development of knowledge about collective action. As social movements continue to change, so too do the methods sociologists use in analyzing them. Examining the four stages of social movements is one way of understanding how social movements form, develop, solidify, and decline. The model can be seen as one of many tools that sociologists use in examining our world.

## Terms & Concepts

**Bureaucratization:** The third stage of a social movement's life cycle in which strategy is carried out by formal organizations and trained staff. Also known as formalization.

**Coalescence:** The second stage of a social movement's life cycle, which is characterized the coming together of social movement constituents. This stage is marked by demonstrations and formulation of strategy.

**Co-optation:** One of the five ways in which social movements decline. This occurs when movement leaders are offered rewards by the movement's opponents in order to divert movement pressure. For example, leaders can either be "paid off" or given a job by the movement's target so as to divert leadership.

**Decline:** The fourth stage in a social movement's life cycle. This stage usually marks the end of mass mobilization. Decline can occur in five ways: repression, co-optation, success, and failure, and establishment within the mainstream.

**Emergence:** The first stage of a social movement's life cycle, which is characterized by individualized, but widespread feelings of discontent. Movements in this stage lack clearly defined strategy for achieving goals and little organization.

**Encapsulation:** One of the ways in which social movements fail. It is marked by an increasing inability for movements to grow because close knit, highly dedicated activist groups become difficult for new adherents to penetrate.

**Extra-institutional:** The area outside of formal political and social institutions in which social movements operate.

**Factionalism:** One of the ways in which social movements fail. It is marked by increasing internal strife within social movements between groups who have differing ideas about how the movement should function or what its goals should have.

**Mass Society Theory:** In early social movement theory it is a theory which argues that rapidly industrializing society led to alienation and the breakdown of traditional social constraints.

**Repression:** One of the five ways in which social movements decline in which authorities use violent or coercive tactics to destroy a social movement.

**Social Movement Abeyance:** A period in some social movements characterized by little or no mobilization. During this period, SMOs often focus inward to focus on identity or values.

**Social Movement Organization (SMO):** A formal group that functions as part of a broader social movement.

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## Essay by Jonathan Christiansen, M.A.

Jonathan Christiansen received his M.A. in Sociology from Boston College. A long time activist, he has continually advocated for collaboration between the academic institution of sociology and community based organizations. His work focuses on social movements, cultural resistance and discourse. In particular, he is interested in the interaction of politics and culture.