

Dissent within Dissent
An Argument in favour of Consensus Decision-making
Models in Social Movements

Paper presented at 'Revisiting Critical Courses @ Carleton',
a Symposium in Ottawa, Canada, June 20-22 2007 ¹

<http://critical-courses.cacim.net/twiki/tiki-index.php>

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¹ This is a revised version of a research paper of the same title prepared in December 2006 for SOCI 5805, Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, Fall 2006 - Challenging Empires : Open Space and Dissent in Movement.

A social movement is a conscious, collective, organized attempt to bring about or resist large-scale change in the social order by non-institutionalized means (Wilson 1973:8). One significance of social movements is that they are one of the media through which new ideas and practices enter the social fabric. They are one of the instruments used to challenge the process of institutionalization. Thus the appearance of social movements is a sign that the old social order is being challenged having lost its sacredness as it becomes irrelevant to people's needs (Wilson, 1973:4).

A pattern of behaviour is said to be institutionalized when it is widely accepted as binding in society or part of society. There are many institutionalized methods of expressing a grievance and pressing for solutions to a particular problem in the institutionalized liberal democratic model such as petitioning, electing representatives to a deliberative body, making out cases to judicial bodies, and organizing boycotts and strikes. While social movements also make use of these tactics when it is strategically necessary, they are more inclined to step outside them and use unconventional methods to make themselves heard and bring pressure to bear upon those who have it in their power to effect change (Wilson, 1973:10). As such, this paper attempts to examine social groups in general, and dissent within social group in particular, contending that social movements themselves are an implicit institutionalized means of expressing dissent and that dissent within the context of dissenting groups is a positive thing that should be encouraged. It should be noted here that the arguments of this paper are generally drawn from research done on social movements in the American context, and is utilized simply because of the volume of information that is available. While there are obvious problems with using the context of United States as a basis for forming a theory about a generic social movement phenomenon, there are enough 'rhetorical echoes' in the analysis of group

behaviour in general and social movements in particular, for such an exploration to be useful.

The paper has two major sections. In the first section examines the conceptual basis for governments; particularly democratic government. This is done to show how social movements were seen by the classic democratic theorists and the so-called Founding Fathers of American Liberal Democracy in a bid to demonstrate that dissent in general, and social movements (as large-scale dissenters) in particular are largely accounted for in a democratic context and are therefore themselves institutionalized. The second section examines social movements themselves, types of social movements, basic features of a social movement as well as the functional problem areas identified by social science research as sources of dissent. This paper contends that dissent within social movements is inevitable, and argues that dissent is a useful tool for social movements to utilize in the quest to attain their goals. This paper also avers that the advantages of dissent can be harnessed using consensus decision-making models which account for dissenting opinions while minimizing the instances of conflict which can be destructive for most social movements. Just as dissent in the form of social movements is accounted for in liberal democracies, so should social movements themselves create a space in their movement for dissent.

Section 1

Dissent in Democracy and the institutionalization of Social Movements

Many point to Hobbes' magnum opus *The Leviathan* as the point at which modern political philosophy begins. In this book Hobbes attempts to give an account of political rule and more importantly why humans must submit to it. Previously, the ancient philosophers had assumed that political rule was 'natural' occurrence.

Aristotle sums up the concept succinctly when he described man as *zoon politikon*, a political animal, from whom everything political naturally flowed. Hobbes on the other hand argued that we have an artificial commonwealth or government because of 'the state of nature'. For Hobbes and others such as John Locke who subscribed to this theory, the state of nature is characterized by man having absolute right to *all* things. Hobbes argued that this state is filled with conflict, hence his famous saying "...life is nasty, brutish and short [in the state of nature]." To avoid this constant conflict where the future was uncertain Man/Men came together and gave their absolute right to everything to a sovereign who could arbitrate conflict and create the type of environment in which people productively pursued their freedoms. For Hobbes and Locke the 'state of nature' was a figurative state to which society reverted when there is no central authority, for example, after a horrific natural disaster or the period shortly after a revolution. Other philosophers such as Rousseau considered the 'state of nature' as an actual point in time.

The so-called Founding Fathers of American Confederacy drew heavily from the work of these philosophers. Using the American type democracy as a model, there is a built in clause in the Declaration of Independence which voices the "self-evident" truth that government derives its "just powers from the consent of the governed." In other words, political legitimacy comes from citizens giving up their absolute right to everything. Thus drawing from this consensual basis of political obligation, the Declaration of Freedom radically concludes that citizens possess the right of rebellion to throw off political obedience. If government loses popular consent: "it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it." This revolutionary document weaves together the themes of social consensus, voluntary obedience, and dissent (Liggio, 1978: 56)

Dissent through this lens is viewed as inevitable because of the natality [difference] inherent in human beings. We are all different and when this difference is coupled with the type of individual freedom which democracy espouses some type of dissent with the state or government is inevitable and forums such as social movements are created as an outlet for it. Thus in liberal democracies dissidence is already, presumably, incorporated into the model of government and is therefore not readily 'visible', unlike in authoritarian states where dissent is an outright act of defiance. Since dissent is, presumably, always already accounted for in liberal democracies it is, presumably, *not* an act of resistance in and of itself. Thus it can be argued that social movements themselves are an 'institutionalized' form of dissent. These philosophers also, theorized that there is a need for the type of stability which government provides since governments cannot be abolished or altered each time there is dissent, because there would be a constant reversion to this 'state of nature'. Thus there is a need to balance the inherent right to dissent with the stability gained from having a government.

To further illustrate the point that social movements are 'institutionalized' the Founding Fathers, recognizing the need for balancing individual freedom and government, instituted systems in which change or alteration of government or government policy can only occur if there is a 'critical mass' of individuals who band together to create the type of change that they feel is necessary or important. This 'critical mass' or group was referred to as factions, of which social movements are apart. In *The Federalist Papers*, particularly Federalist 10, Madison argued that an extended republic can control the effects of majority factions without violating basic republican principles, (legitimacy from the consent of the governed), so little can and should be done to eliminate factions. He placed little reliance on appeals to a higher

morality or religion in ‘staying the hand’ of a majority faction in carrying out their goals. By the same token, he had little faith that written constitutional limitations could block factions. So a number of checks and balances had to be in place in order to manage the instability that these factions would/could create as these factions represented a *range* of ideas and prescriptions for government. Thus for instance the time it takes to change/enact laws was extensive and more extreme factions would have to compromise their position if they wanted to earn a place in the legislature to get the type of power necessary to make change they wanted. Therefore Madison attempted to find ways to incorporate dissent into the state in a manner that might prove vital to the health of the state itself. The space that was created for these factions to operate in gradually evolved into what we now know as civil society which is loosely defined by some as that ‘space’ between the government and households.

In his book, *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville discusses the dangers of modern democratic states. He argues that the state, by controlling education, health care, social security, extends its grip over the individuals. As individuals are brought more and more under public administration, they lose more and more their individual freedom, which is the reason they theoretically submitted to government in the first place. Tocqueville then gives importance to the associational life of individuals and sees it as an effective means to check and balance the state power. Self - organised, vigilant civil² associations can keep a watchful eye on the state and prevent it from becoming the sole agency to regulate its citizens’ lives. This is where social movements can play a role in both enacting change in society and a means of

² Civil here refers to original meaning from the Latin *civilis* which means ‘of the citizen’. Citizens in their ordinary capacity, or of the ordinary life and affairs of citizens, as distinguished from military and those holding formal political office.

curbing the growth of state power. As such, they are a fundamental aspect of a healthy functioning democracy, and a crucial ingredient in any democratic political system.

Section 2

Social Movements and Dissent within Dissent; An Argument in favour of Consensus Decision- making

Traditionally, social scientists have distinguished social movements from interest groups based upon collective actors' tactical choices and their relationship to power holders. Groups relying primarily upon non-institutionalized tactics such as disruptive protests, and who do not enjoy routine access to political decision makers, have been defined as social movement organizations (SMOs). Groups that "work within the system" and have more access to the polity have been deemed *interest groups*.

In general sociologists have identified three basic types of social movement:

1. *Transformative movement* aimed at total change in the social structure –
Social movements in this category tend to share an expectation of a sudden, imminent and sometimes violent overthrow of the existing order, which will bring about the reversal of fortunes such that those presently at the bottom of the status hierarchy will be established in positions at the top. Examples include Bolshevism in Russia and Solidarity in Poland (Wilson, 1973:25)
2. *Reformative movements* aimed at partial change in supra-individual systems -
Social movements in this category seek to reform a system which is seen as basically good but they stop short of total rejection of the present social order. Movements in this category tend to concern themselves with inequities and

injustices suffered by categories of people as a result of practices which seem to contradict the basic values of the society. Their belief is that through the rectification of these injustices, a better total society will be achieved.

Examples of these movements include the those seeking to change laws and discriminatory practices such as the Women's movement and the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP); those seeking to change policies such as Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament ; those seeking to change established social habits such as the Sexual Freedom League and Concerned Women of America.

3. *Redemptive movements* aimed at total change in the individual. This type of social movement interprets social problems and their causes in exclusively individualistic terms. The movement is usually geared toward changing some hypothesized 'inner state' of the individual. Many religious social movements such as the Salvation Army tend to fall in this category. However since the concern for redemption is usually phrased in terms of individual self-realization, groups such as the International Foundation for International Freedom developed in the 1960's to spread the use of psychedelic drugs also fall into this category.

It should be noted here that while these categorizations are useful for conceptualizing the various social movements that exist, they do not fully capture the true variations that are evident in reality. It could be argued that the above categories represent ideal types as in reality social movements may move through phases where in the initial stages they fall into one category as the movement matures it may move into another.

For example The Women's Christian Temperance Movement in Canada started out as a movement agitating for changes in the law regulating alcohol consumption which they saw as responsible for the degradation and impoverishment of society. However the group found themselves confronted with sexism and realized that fundamental structural changes needed to take place relating to the role of women on society. So the Women's Christian Temperance Movement moved from being a redemptive movement to a reform movement. However, despite the problems with these categorizations, they will prove useful in helping us to elucidate the issue of dissent in social movements.

Before looking at dissent in social movements we need to first examine the minimum basic requirements that give rise to a coherent (minimal) functioning social movement. These features as outlined from the results of various sociological studies are:

- There are one or more motives shared by individuals that are conducive to their interaction with one another.
- Each individual's experience and behavior is affected in varying ways and degrees by the interaction process
- If interaction continues, a group structure consisting of hierarchical status and role relationship is stabilized, and is clearly delineated as an in-group from other group structures
- A set of norms regulating relations and activities within the group and with non-members and out-group members is standardized

Interaction is not made a separate item in these basic requirements because interaction is the sine qua non of any kind of social relationship, whether impersonal or group.

Since human interactions takes place largely on a symbolic level, communication is considered an integral part of the process. A standardized set of norms are introduced which generically regulate member's behaviour in terms of the expected or even the ideal behaviour as well as the range of acceptable behavior. These features will be significant in analyzing dissent in social movements. This is because the environment created by the dynamism associated with social movements as described by Mueller (1994) creates 'cultural laboratories' where new collective identities are being constructed from expressive interactions of individuals experimenting with new cultural codes, forms of relationships, and alternative perceptions of the world. This is where consensus decision-making, which explores various dissenting viewpoints and possibilities, focuses and directs them towards an entente that all acknowledge and feel that they can own, is most valuable (Moscovici and Doise, 1994:23). Consensus is needed in situations where there is large scale change because raising new problems, holding up instances of novel modes of behaviour, creating unexpected differences, naturally provokes dissent and the breaking of ties (Moscovici and Doise, 1994:18).

In focusing specifically on dissent within social movements, we can see that it develops or is fostered by a number of functional problem areas as identified by Parsons (1953) namely

1. The problem of goal attainment – concerns about the need to (a) provide “clear directives for action and relatively unambiguous criteria for evaluating organizational success and individual contributions it.”(b) making decisions about which goals are to be given priority and how they are to be achieved and (c) the allocation of responsibilities and resources among personnel.

2. The problem of integration – this refers to the movement’s need to (a) maintain solidarity in the face of differentiation of labour; (b) control performance so that separate efforts are coordinated harmoniously; (c) facilitate the passage of information concerning reciprocal role expectations assuming that harmony is impossible without adequate communication.
3. The problem of adaptation involves the movement’s need to utilize the resources of the environment and react to changes in that environment.
4. The problem of pattern maintenance and tension-management involves the movements need to (a) interpret and select goals as congruent with some higher order values, legitimizing those goals and interpreting commitment to them in a more transcendental way; (b) socialize members into these values and maintain their commitment to them and their required role performances. In other words it must be clear to members what is expected of them in terms of the values of the group: (c) enable the members to reconcile the demands made upon them by the movement with those made upon them by the wider society

Movements face the issue of striving for the need for optimal balance of rewards and costs for the movement by addressing the problems that arise in the above functional areas. It is considered manifestly impossible to move toward a solution that addresses all four functional areas at once. However, emphasis placed upon one set of activities is bound to create tension in the area of another (Wilson 163). At the same time, if a balance is not struck among these four functional problem areas, the

resulting dissent that naturally arises may generate outright conflict causing in the social movement to be perceived negatively. The movement may lose credibility, crucial material resources, and access to power holders. Their effectiveness and even their survival may be impacted. Bitter internal conflicts often result from a situation where there is no framework to deal with dissenting opinions which pits difficult decisions against cherished principles. The splitting of the African-American struggle of the 1960s into antagonistic yet symbiotic "civil rights" and "black power" factions (Haines 1988) represents perhaps the best known example of this dilemma, and scholars and activists alike continue to debate whether black militancy produced a white backlash that brought the cycle of protest to a premature end. Dissent arose in this context when the ideology of the group urged resistance, recklessness, abandon, non-violence and challenge. Some members were afraid that the things that are asked of them would endanger the movement's safety as a group; others were concerned that accommodation and compromise may dilute the movement's message and retard its progress

Dissent however can have a positive role to play. Studies have shown that uniformity through groupthink often found in groups in general, was identified as the cause of the adoption of a preferred solution without adequate consideration of information and alternatives. Others suggest that it is difficult for people to question their own judgment especially when it is bolstered by consensus. Thus, authentic dissent, (as opposed to dissenting to stand out) has been found to actively stimulate such cognitive activity. Those exposed to dissent actually searched for more information, considered more strategies in the service of performance, and evidenced more original thought. They also detected correct solutions that otherwise would have

gone unnoticed. In naturally occurring groups, the presence of minority dissent has been found to improve the quality and quantity of ideas and solutions. The kind of consensus decision-making which this paper advocates would overcome the doubt that emerges from the comparison of opinions, and the exchange of arguments for and against a particular point/issue and reduce the chances of making serious errors of judgment. It could also stave off the destructive conflict that could emerge from misunderstandings between defenders of different positions. Indeed Moscovici and Doise aver that mutual criticisms and collective examination of various viewpoints lead to decisions that are free from prejudice and subjective distortions.

Dissent can be seen as an antidote to the concurrence-seeking (group-think) tendencies in groups that include a lack of consideration of both information and alternative. In other words dissent is more effective in stimulating unbiased thinking, considerations of both sides of an issue as well as original independent thought. However, dissenting viewpoints that do not seriously challenge a group member's own judgment may fail to provide sufficient motivation for the reassessment of currently held views and a search for alternatives.

The disadvantage of authentic dissent lies primarily in the conflict it engenders and the dislike for the person holding the dissenting viewpoint. Despite the positive considerations of dissent we have to, in future studies, seriously examine the conflict that emerges within social movements as a result of the rejection of the dissenter's opinions, its execution, and effect on the morale and cohesion of the group as well as goal attainment. Social movements are typically advocating for fundamental changes in society, and as such, undertaking such an exploration is of paramount importance. It should be noted that it is generally within those social movements that expect unanimity in which dissent can be most destructive as it inevitably leads to conflict.

This is because members may have to silence their doubts in order to be seen as fitting in or to be a 'team-player'. A dissenting opinion in such a context usually results in the motives of the 'dissenter' being questioned. This is particularly significant because as outlined above, shared motives are one of the basic requirements of a minimal functioning social movement. As Moscovici and Doise write "...[people] sincerely believe themselves obliged to behave with intolerance towards anyone who proves an obstacle to this consensus, [by unanimity] since 'truth' cannot manifest as long as someone rejects it" By discouraging people from proposing dissenting opinions the diversity of interests and possibilities are sacrificed in favour of convergence and agreement.

The argument of this paper however, is that while dissent is inevitable, the power of dissent can be harnessed into a framework for assimilating new ideas and controversies regarding ever-changing dilemmas. It should be noted however that the larger social movements become the more difficult this is to achieve and it may not be possible to fully explore the spectrum of dissenting opinions across cultures and even countries since some social movements are international in scope. The use of elected delegates is often the solution proposed in such a context even though there are serious shortcomings with this solution. This is because decreasing the number of participants in the decision-making process naturally reduces sources of tension and instability which is inherent in this framework. However, if too much time is spent in decision-making the movement may be seen as ineffectual since they are not '*doing anything*'.

Social movements are a group for which goal attainment is a priority (as opposed to recreational groups for which satisfaction the priority). Initially social movement become absorbed in those activities which are seen as directing the group

toward goal attainment, however these groups eventually become more concerned with self-maintenance and stability often at the expense of goal attainment. Wilson (1973) writes that the process of organizational transformation involves movement away from goal attainment and integrative priorities where the realization of the values of the group and its internal solidarity for that purpose are paramount, to adaptive and pattern-maintenance priorities where the accommodation of the movement to its social environment and the stability and continuity of its organization are valued most highly. It is at this point where dissent can occur most strongly. Many participants in the civil-rights struggle of the 1950s and 1960s struggled with this transition. One member wrote:

I'm tired, but so is the whole movement. We're busy worrying about our position or our finances, so we don't do anything anymore... We're becoming lifeless, just like all revolutions when they lose their first momentum and become more interested in preserving what they've won than going on to new challenges....Only with us we haven't won that much, and we're either holding on to the little we have as an organization, or we get bitter, and want to create a new revolution. (Coles 1969:319)

This paper is advocating for dissent be seen as a useful aspect of the decision-making process in social movements. There is a place created for dissent in the context of democracy of which social movements themselves are an integral part. This framework was discussed above with the arguments of the philosophers who advocated for the type of individual freedom democracies provide. Social movement as dissenters themselves can and should adopt a favourable attitude toward dissent within dissent, because harmony and cooperation in these movements rely on a political and social framework that is favourable to radical dissenting opinions. Such a framework encourages a variety of viewpoints and possibilities more effectively than one which focuses heavily on unanimity to safeguard group cohesion. Also this

framework will avoid conflict which is typically destructive to social movements as members expend their energies dealing with the effects of this conflict and lose sight of the goal of the movement. Individuals in social movements who make decisions in the environment of consensus are conscious of having given their consent to a decision that they have had some part in, and have consciously made the sacrifices and compromise that may be required. Thus, if dissenting opinions arise during decision-making, the results that flow from that process will not impose constraints on these individuals if their viewpoints are seriously taken into consideration. These decisions will then have more legitimacy than if dissenting opinions and ideas were dismissed/ignored. The value of decisions is diminished greatly if there are a number of people whose dissenting opinions are not given serious consideration resulting in abstentions and withdrawals, as well as hostility and apathy (Moscovici and Doise, 1994).

It must be stressed that harnessing the power of dissent in a consensus decision-making model does not mean that participants all subscribe to the same conception of what ought to be the intended objective emerging from their deliberations. Rather, it means that they accept collectively the right of each individual to voice their dissenting opinion, and the duty of everyone to weigh the arguments of both the majority and the minority in order to discover the unifying link between them (Moscovici and Doise, 1994:56). This is a clear attempt to reconcile with the inevitability of dissent while simultaneously diminishing conflict.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to examine social groups in general and dissent within social group in particular. It contended that social movements themselves are an

implicit institutionalized means of expressing dissent and that dissent within the context of dissenting groups is a positive and productive means of achieving sound decision making and should therefore be encouraged. Drawing on the work of philosophers whose theoretical arguments were used as the basis for modern-day democracy, it can be argued that social movements are themselves institutionalized modes of dissent. In recognizing the power inherent in having a variety of viewpoints, social movements should themselves adopt more favourable attitudes toward dissent by utilizing a consensus decision-making models in which dissent has been accounted for. Dissent can be constructive for social movements while conflict, the result of unmediated dissent, can and is usually destructive.

This paper is the basis of further studies and there is awareness that there are a lot of assumptions made by the author that cannot be sufficiently ‘fleshed out’ in light of time constraints. The author contends that these assumptions are not so significant that they challenge the basic premise of the arguments in this paper which is that social movements themselves are an institutionalized form of dissent in the context of democracy, and that dissent is a powerful tool that can be utilized by social movements to develop more fruitful decisions.

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