Questioning the Distinctiveness of New Social Movements: The Case of the Flagellanti in the High Middle Ages

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Abstract

Is the difference between new social movements and older social movements really that substantial? New social movement scholars argue that older social movements were primarily concerned with matters of the economy and social status through class struggle, while new social movements differ in their considerations of identity, personal goals, and protecting the lifeworld. In this paper, I argue that the concept of new social movements is not as distinct as some scholars may imagine it, as in fact, the movement of the Flagellanti, which was a religious movement that started nearly 800 years ago, would fit descriptions of new social movements as defined by key scholars like Touraine, Habermas, and Castells.

Social Movements & Religion

Religion = important dimension in identity formation, social inclusion, and boundary maintenance (Fenn, 2023)

- Religious membership ~ SM* membership
- Protection of member & Common identity
- Moral compass & Societal change
- Religion as legitimizer of a cause

New Social Movements

Breaking away from class struggle and economic inequality to identity and culture.

- **Touraine:** identity building, individual actors
- **Habermas:** ‘colonization of the lifeworld’
- **Melucci:** internal and external change in SM’s
- **Castells:** emotions & networks
- **Cohen:** self-limiting radicalization

Critique

Matters of identity and culture were not only part of post-industrial SM’s. Common ground of New and Old Social Movements:

- **D’Anieri et al.:** lists identity formation in pre-industrial SM’s (Chartists, Oneida etc)
- **Frank and Calhoun:** Defensive/Protective character **Calhoun:** Politicization of everyday life
- **Frank:** Importance of structural opportunity

The Flagellanti

Religious Catholic groups in the High Middle Ages who practices humility and repentance through self-flagellation, as a result of the hardships of the time (Plague, Political Instability and War, Poverty)

Methodology

*Comparative analysis between the characteristics of NSM’s as defined by Touraine, Habermas, Melucci, and Castells and the Flagellanti, in order to effectively question the distinctiveness of NSM’s** as a concept.*

→ *Drawing parallels between the two objects of study*

Findings

- ❖ Flagellanti seek change within and in society (repentance – salvation for all)
- ❖ Non-revolutionary (total change) – amendment of society – self-limiting radicalization
- ❖ Harsh living conditions as **Divine Punishment** – invoking emotions of fear
- ❖ Strict moral code driving social action (self-exemplification)
- ❖ Distinct identity and confraternities
- ❖ Demise due to institutionalization

References

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Image: Lorenzo Fasolo, Virgin of Mercy with Two Angels and the Confraternity of Sant’Innocenzo, 1490s(?). Panel, 75 × 150 cm. Palazzo Vescovile, Pavia. Photo: Andrew Chen.

*SM = Social Movement
** NSM = New Social Movement