

SOCIAL ACTIVISM: THEORIES AND METHODS*

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Abstract: *Social activism is a corollary for social change. Social activism is about doing, acting, mobilizing the resources and supporting leadership to bring change in society. The paper tries to define the concept of the social activism, to reveal the theories about social activism and social movements and to bring to attention some methods for the study of the social activism.*

Key words: *social activism; social change; social movements; online activism; collective actions*

Introduction

Social activism is an instrument for social movements. It shows how people can organize themselves, how they can participate to protests, the degree of involvement in decisions and in social life. It reveals the degree of the participatory democracy.

Activism is present in every society and political system, but it never received enough attention from historians, social scientists or political scientists. There are many forms of social activism, from writing letters to massive protests.

The paper wants to demonstrate the importance of the social activism as an instrument of social change and to discuss upon relevant methods for the study of this process. The theme is very important for the state of the society and its future, showing the dynamic of the social change in time.

First, the article tries to define the concept of social activism, then it underlines the theories of the social activism. Finally, the paper proposes a discussion about the methods for the study of the social activism and recommends a methodology for the future researches on this issue.

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What is Social Activism?

According to Oxford Dictionary, social activism means „the policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change: growing activism on the abortion issue”¹.

Urban Dictionary shows that „activism, in a general sense, can be described as intentional action to bring about social, political, economic, or environmental change. This action is in support of, or opposition to, one side of an often controversial argument”².

When we talk about social activism, we talk about social change. In a presentation from Amherst College about „Social Activism. Careers in Social Activism-An Introduction”, it is underline the fact that social activism is „an intentional action with the goal of bringing about social change”.

There are different types of activism:

1) “Demanding solutions to contemporary problems through the taking of oppositional stances to mainstream policies. These includes short-term actions like strikes, protests, demonstrations;

2) Undertaking activism which manifests itself through the creation of alternatives to the dominant system through the construction of new ways of social behaviour;

3) This type of activism seeks to create new alternatives within societies. We can talk about social centres, cooperatives of workers etc;

4) Revolutionary activism that is concerned with fundamental change of society and its major institutions”³.

Activism is about doing, acting, making an action that brings change in society. It provides mobilization, supporting leadership and bringing direction of the social action.

Social activists are implicated in collective actions. For these actions, they need a good organization, but especially resources.

Oliver P. and Marwell G. (1992) define social activists as „people who care enough about some issue that they are prepared to incur significant costs and act to achieve their goals”.

The activists believe in change, in doing social good. Oliver and Marwell show that the activists use planification, predictions, prognosis and elaborate backup plans. Through planification and prognosis, social activists define „technologies of productions” as being „sets of knowledge about ways of achieving goals, such as lobbying, demonstrations, strikes, or attending a public hearing” (Oliver and Marwell, 1992).

For the achievements of the goals, the activists are appealing for „ask those you know” techniques, meaning a list of persons which the rate of succes is very large (Ibid.). They use different methods: promovations through media, publicity, social networks for a better mobilization.

¹Oxford Dictionary, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/activism>

²Urban Dictionary, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Social%20Activist>

³„Introduction to activism”- Permanent culture now
<http://www.permanentculturenow.com/what-is-activism/>

Theories and methods

The Social Activism Theory emerged as a product of Constructivism school of thought. The Social Activism Theory was defined on the belief that “learning takes place in social environments where there are collaborative activities. Through these activities, learners communicate, interact, and learn from each other, as a result, constructing their own world of knowledge” (Tan, 2006: 4-5).

The scholars regarded to be the founders of the social activism theory were John Dewey, considered to be „the grandfather of Constructivism” (Roblyer and Doering, 2010: 41), Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. John Dewey, also known as a radical activist, developed his studies on education. He formulated some principles of education who maintained the fact that „education must engage with and enlarge experience” (Smith, 2011). „Learning should be experienced- based”, concluded Dewey (Roblyer and Doering, 2010). “Experience is a foundation for learning which would then be transformed into knowledge and skill” (Conole et al., 2004: 20). Jean Piaget had also a significant influence on Constructivism from educational perspective. Piaget considered that “there are three mechanisms for learning: assimilation, accommodation, and equilibrium” (Leonard, Noh, and Orey, 2007). His work was focused on cognitive development. Lev Vygotsky’s work was concentrated on „social interaction in the development of cognition” (Leonard, Noh, and Orey, 2007).

Constructivism approach considers that „social interactions and context are necessary for learning to occur” (Matthews, 2003: 57).

Social activism is concerned on the social interactions and collective behaviour.

Most of the authors are referring to social participation, mobilization, social movements when they are speaking about social activism.

There are some theories that describe social activism and also social movements. The Marxist theory tried to explain social movements through economical factors. The Marxist sociology described that „the organization of the products has generated conflicts of interests” (Sava, 2013: 98). Later, Wallerstein has used the materialist theory on the world economy to explain the relationship between the capitalist, developed core and the underdeveloped, peripheral countries. The anti-systemic, anti- globalist movements are explained through the Marxist theory.

The liberal perspective underlines that „the collective action is the result of the rational choice of the individuals interested in the support of an objective associated with economical and civil liberties” (Ibid.: 100). It were developed some frameworks including resource mobilization, political opportunity structures, constructivism etc.

Taking into account the economic and political aspects of social movements, McCarthy and Zald formulated the resource mobilization theory.

The authors noted that the social movements are rational actions. They used for the explanation the rationalist theory or rational choice theory of collective decisions.

The theory of resources mobilization was predicted by the theory of rational choice. On this perspective, Mancur Olson published „The Logic of Collective Action” (1965) in view of the economic outlook of the social movements. According to this theory the association of similar minded individuals could lead to the organization of the collective actions.

The rational action theory considers that participation in collective action is the result of a rational cost-benefit calculation.

Concerning Snow and Oliver (1995): „1. people try to benefit at minimum cost and 2. they cognitively process the information about the likely costs and benefits of various options for actions and then they make a conscious choice regarding their behavior” (Snow and Oliver, 1995 apud Sava, 2013, p. 76). Granovetter (1978) concluded that there is a threshold that the individual passes assessing risk and benefit involved.

In the 80's, resource mobilization theory was completed by network theory. Social organizations and existing networks provide a flow mobilization of resources. McAdam (1986) states that solidarity networks assures solidarity and provide membership for organizations rather than the individuals, leading to a coalitions of communities..

In the United States the framework of political process replaced the resource mobilization theory in the late 80s.

Morris A. and Herring C. (1984) revealed that in the political process theory, collective action and their tactics are provided to promote group interests.. When we talk about collective action, we are referring to groups, not individuals. Organizations support the claims and mobilization.

Ionel Nicu Sava stresses that political competition defines opportunity, mobilization and collective action. Therefore, constructivists have challenged the political process model. Useem B. (1998) states that "to argue that collective action is all a part of the political struggle is to exaggerate the centrality of power and imposing an ideology of social change where there is none" (Useem, 1998 apud Sava, 2013: 86).

But these theories can really explain social activism? How these theories can help the activists, how can they become a guide for them?

The resource mobilization theory claims that movements needed to obtain resources- money, skills, even time etc. to conduct collective activities. It is a step forward concerning the organization of the manifestations, but the activists know already that the resources are very important.

The political process model underlines that movements are constrained by political opportunities. Sometimes, some political opportunities may bring progress in society. As Brian Martin says, "the political opportunity structure approach is more helpful in explaining the trajectory of movements, afterwards, than in helping activists to be more effective" (Martin, 2010: 22-41).

Brian Martin uses „the idea of framing”. „Framing refers to sets of ideas. The ideas that people use to think about an issue that often influence their attitudes towards it. Frame analysis offers a powerful tool for activists to think through the way they construct an issue” (Ibid.). For example, if some people use Marxist theory, they see the world in terms of class struggle. So, the attitudes of the activists are conducted by the frame analysis.

Besides these, if we are talking about social activism, how the researches in social movements can help the activists?

James Jasper says that the researches on social movements couldn't guide the activists. „My research on social movements showed me just how little social scientists have to say about strategy. Over the years many protestors have asked me what they might read to help them make better decisions. I had nothing to suggest, beyond Saul Alinsky. We knew about the political effects of strategic choices, especially effects on the state's reaction, which most scholars assumed to be the key issue. This was the most structural way of looking at strategy. We knew almost nothing, I discovered, about how activists (and others) make strategic decisions, much less how they might make good ones”(Jasper, 2006, pp. xii- xiii).

As Jasper claims, the researchers are more concerned about the „effects on the state's reaction” (Jasper, 2006) rather than the reactions of the actors of the social movements. „Scholars often analyse the agency of the state, namely the state's strategic options” (Ibid.).

Brian Martin suggests that it is necessary to learn how the social movements can be more effective than to understand them. „It might be worthwhile figuring out how movements can be more effective, even without fully understanding the dynamics” (Martin, 2010: 22-41).

Some scholars tried to describe how it's really happening with the social movements and not to rely on „unrealistic expectations”.

Moyer discovers a model of eight stages through which a typical movement passes: „(1) normal times, (2) prove the failure of official institutions, (3) ripening conditions, (4) take-off, (5) perception of failure, (6) majority public opinion, (7) success and (8) continuing the struggle” (Moyer, McAllister J. et. Al, 2001). It's useful for activists to know how their action is, so they can pick the useful strategy.

Moyer made a classification of social movement participants: citizen, rebel, change agent and reformer. Moyer says „each role has something to offer, but certain roles are more relevant in particular stages, for example rebels in the take-off stage” (Ibid.). He pays special attention to "negative rebels," such as "personal opportunists" who seek personal goals. The model explained by Moyer was useful and practical for activists. It helps activists to think strategically.

Another theory is that of Gene Sharp's „dynamics of nonviolent action” (Sharp, 2013: 47).

Sharp stipulates that „nonviolent action is based on a very simple postulate: people do not always do what they are told to do, and sometimes they act in ways that have been forbidden” (Sharp, 2013: 17). Nonviolent

action, as Sharp underlines is referring to all methods of protests in which the protesters maintain the conflict refusing to obey to some rules without using violence. „Nonviolent action is a technique by which people who reject passivity and submission, and who see struggle as essential can wage their conflict without violence” (Sharp, 2013: 18).

Sharp classifies nonviolent action into three main types. The first actions are symbolic methods like speeches, petitions, rallies, mock awards, vigils, teach-ins and renunciation of honours. The second actions refer to methods of noncooperation, such as ostracism, suspension of sports activities, stay-at-home, rent strikes, refusal to sell property, withdrawal of bank deposits, embargoes, peasant strikes, general strike, boycott of elections, administrative stalling, and mutiny. The third actions provide methods of intervention such as fasting, sit-ins, alternative communication systems, occupation of work sites, alternative markets and parallel government (Sharp, 2013).

In the second part of his book, „How Nonviolent Struggles Works”, the author shows the methods of nonviolent action. He classifies the methods in three groups: protest and persuasion, noncooperation and nonviolent intervention (Sharp, 2013: 23). In the next chapters, Sharp describes the methods of each group.

The author underlines the fact that there are no studies of strategy or techniques on how to conduct the conflicts or how to organize the people. That’s why Sharp considers that is not surprising that the violence have most often erupted. Despite all these, Sharp shows some possibilities for activists by transforming them into agents of changes.

Methodologies proposed for the study of the social activism

Those who wanted to do researches about activists said that one of the most suitable theories is „grassroots theory”: „ideas come out of practice, with contributions from lots of people” (Sharp apud Martin, 2010: 22-41). The researchers were very interested on ideas from the activists to study their reactions. But, as Martin underlined, there is a gap between the activists and their ideas about researches.

So, how could it be developed a methodology for the study of social activism?

According to the research in the activists’ field, more productive techniques are so called workshops – small group interactions where people can analyze their case studies. This technique is very efficient in the USA.

Nowadays, when technology is advanced, there is a new way to promote case studies and to study activists’ messages: online activism. The Internet is the main resource for activists’ messages, especially for those against the main current.

Internet activists use electronic petitions (e-petitions) that are addressed to governments and organizations to cause positive changes in politics. Many non-profit organizations and charities organisations use these

methods. Internet technologies are used for charity, lobbying organizations, fundraising, for e-campaigning.

Online network sites are also very important instruments for activists. The Internet allows the communications between nongovernmental organisations and their members. Lobby is easily done through the Internet, with online messages sent in media.

Sandor Vegh (2003) related three forms of social activism: awareness/advocacy, organization/ mobilization, or the planning and deliberation as a result of the information, and action/reaction, or the result of the planning and deliberation. Vegh analyzed the case for cyber-protest against the World Bank using the analyses of websites. He created a catalog of websites representative in which the case occurs, and then he examined the content. He tried to reveal, as Van Aelst and Walgrave (2004) illustrate a „link topology”. Devin Gaffney (2010) defined this „a method without using any of the data creation/collection techniques that typify Web 2.0”.

Devin Gaffney (2010) used in his study concerning Iran election „Web 2.0’s automatic collection method” which consists in direct analysis of the communication, using Twitter Search API. The method consisted practically in „collecting tweets carrying the most seemingly popular “hashtag,” in this case, #iranElection” (Gaffney, 2010), storing the data associated with the tweet: the time it was posted, the characteristics of the persons who posted, the number of followers etc. The data were collected on a dataset and then the author processes the data into three categories: „histogram-based analysis of the Users and Tweets, network-based analysis of the re-tweets called “re-tweet influence maps” (Gaffney, 2010). The re-tweet influence map is a useful instrument in analyzing the most influential users of the social networking sites. „A network map of every re-tweet that occurred in the entire data set would inform us as to who the most influential users were, as well as the general flow of re-tweets from those influential users to “hubs” of people who tend to re-tweet frequently, and then throughout the network” (Gaffney, 2010). Gaffney underlines another interesting analysis for Iran election tweets: „language-based analysis to analyze the qualitative nature of all Tweets” which consisted in a word frequency analysis.

The social activism methodologies should take into account new Web technologies. There are a series of programs which can identify new approaches in the study of the online activism. The techniques underlined below showed the possibility to study online activism. Besides online activism, there is another form of activism: offline activism. Interviews, participatory observations, survey or questionnaires on the street are some of the methods used for studying offline activism.

Some studies (Summer and Harp, 2012) showed that online activism is followed by offline activism. Manifestations streets are those who bring sometimes the real change. So, the most efficient way to study social activism and its dimensions is to be there, in the streets, with the activists and to watch and analyze the situations through their views. Other studies (Hirzalla and van Zoonen, 2009) claimed that online activism converge with

offline activism. Another research (Mercea, 2012) underlined that those who participated in online networks were involved in offline protests. The researches mentioned below used online surveys, questionnaires, websites studies, and ethnographic data to reveal the importance of the online activism and its link with offline activism.

There were some critics concerning online activism. Some proponents of the slacktivism theory concluded that „internet activism is thought to be inadequate at reaching political goals in comparison to traditional forms of activism” (Vargas, 2013: 16). Slacktivism is defined as „political participation that lacks a strong commitment by the participants” (Ibid.: 11). Even Putnam (2010) suggested that the Internet could diminished the possibility of social interaction and could have a negative impact on citizen’s political participation. In spite of these, Bennett (2012) sustained that the internet is an important tool for people who had been participating in political activities offline to also participate in online activities.

Anyway, in the last years, the possibilities of the study of social activism have increased. New forms of social media (Facebook, Twitter) have raised the possibilities of sharing the information, recruiting new members and mobilizing people.

A methodology for the study of social activism should reconsider the methods for the study of the emergence of the social networks, the membership in online networks and the characteristics of the members, the possibility to recruit another users and in the same time, the capacity to mobilize people in collective actions

Conclusions

The paper tries to emphasize the social activism and to propose some methods to study this process. The theories about social actions and social movements show different perspectives and reflect the researcher’s positions. But, the researches about social movements could really reflect social activism? There are few authors who try to show that the researches on social movements couldn’t guide the activists. As Jasper claims, the researchers are more concerned about the „effects on the state’s reaction” (Jasper, 2006) rather than the reactions of the actors of the social movements. It is necessary to develop some methods that are concerned more about the activists strategies, to guide them and to offer some steps in tackling strategic decisions.

Nowadays, when the internet becomes the most influential instrument in the study of the activism, the researches should take into account the study of the online networks and websites. There are many techniques for the study of the messages, network sites or groups who encourages for mobilization, online petitions etc. The studies about online activism are increasing and the methods used are improving. A methodology for the study of the social activism should reconsider the process of social activism from online and offline perspective.

More detailed techniques for studying online networks or offline activism are among the limits of the paper.

The future researches should concentrate on the methodologies for studying online and offline activism, the emergence of the online networks, the membership of networks, the characteristics of the network's members and their possibility to recruit another members and if online network's members are participating in offline activities.

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