

# Social Movements

By Samuel Eklom for SCS110: Introduction to Sociology Society, Culture and Change

This essay is about [New] Social Movements (NSMs), inequality and social change. It seeks to address these topics by critically examining them in the context of society and the discipline of sociology. It will be argued that movement and society are two sides of the same coin: that the changing conflictual representations of society are reflected in the expressions of changing forms and content of movements, and as the world continues to develop, social change will continue to take place and inequalities will continue to rise and fall. A brief review of the history of social movements, particularly the French and Industrial Revolutions, will establish that these were the first times in history when a collective group of people successfully overcame a perceived inequality resulting in social change. Discussing the rise of feminism will give insight into the political, social and economic inequalities challenging the success of New Social Movements. The history of women's rights in Australia will be used as an example to determine the prospects of these and future social movements achieving their desired change(s).

It is difficult to provide the specific date marking the 'beginning' of the Industrial and French Revolutions. According to More (2000), 1750 and 1850 are chronological conveniences that are as good as any other dates as markers for the beginning and end of these economic and social phenomena. Some state that the French Revolution began in May of 1789, with the meeting of the Estates General (Hunt 1998). Hunt (1998) goes on to describe it as a revolution led by concepts like egalitarianism, justice, organisational rationalism and anticlericalism – all ideas relating to the search for a better society. The foundations of these and any other forms of collective action, however, is conflict. Singh (2001, p. 28) talks about social conflict and describes it as an interactional concept that presupposes the existence of two or more persons or groups in a situation of opposing claims and contestations, which involve issues and questions. Parsons (1954) believed in social 'roles' and described society as a system which contained other sub-systems, all working towards a similar goal. A functioning 'social system', according to Parsons (1954), is one where stability and relative absence of conflict is maintained, but only if the parties within that system have developed sufficient motivation to 'play along' and work together in an ordered way (Joas & Knöbl 2009, p. 64). Of course, this implies that any form of social action advocating for change is considered to be in conflict with the norms and values within these social structures, and could possibly lead to some form of punishment. Marx (1933), however, theorised that withholding one's cooperation through strikes and civil disobedience was a powerful method of struggle (Bartos & Wehr 2002, p. 27). van Krieken et al. (2010, p. 15) argues the two revolutions of this period radically transformed Western society, and alongside momentous technological changes, the process of industrialisation triggered massive population movements, rapid urbanisation, changing family structures, and a range of new ideas.

With this new-found sense of choice and liberty, systems of norms and values developed in different forms throughout different groups and societies. For Parsons (1954), it was

fundamental to social order that there were some means by which people can align their values and moral principles so that they could cooperate and work towards shared goals (van Krieken et al. 2010). Also discovered was the capacity of the human to congregate ‘for’ or ‘against’ social issues (values, practices, conduct and behaviour) and events; to express collective resentment, including violence; and to develop and use the methods and strategies of mobilisation (Singh 2001, p. 95). So came the term ‘New Social Movements’. The aim of NSMs, according to Singh (2001), is to reorganise the relations between state, society and the economy; to advocate for social change; and to create a public space in which democratic discourse on autonomy and freedom of the individual, their identities, and their orientations could be discussed and examined. Marx (1933) saw social change as the product of human action operating within the constraints of the ‘raw materials’ of history available to them: the political, legal and economic institutions; the ideas to which the population was responsive; and the particular charismatic individuals who happen to be on the public stage (van Krieken et al. 2010, p. 472).

The decades of the 1960s and 1970s marked a series of eye-opening experiences for a generation of female activists trained in civil rights and anti-war movements, who, despite their contributions, were nevertheless finding themselves victims of sexism (Wallace 1989). An understanding of male and female as distinctly different, and complementary to an understanding of male and female as equal, was a radical shift in gender ideology (Hughes 2002). Feminists argue that, as we are all born equal, we should be treated as equals. Healey (2014) discusses equality and states that many countries, including Australia, have made real progress towards gender equality in recent decades in areas such as education; however, Australian women continue to earn less than men, are less likely to advance in their careers, and are more likely to spend their later years living in poverty.

The rise of the women’s movement, and of other movements promoting the rights of minorities, raised questions about gender stereotypes and led to an increased consciousness of diversity in gender patterns and behaviour. Comte (1976) believed that the division of tasks between males and females was based on biological differences, especially those of a ‘mental’ nature (Alexander & Thompson 2008, p. 273). According to Alexander & Thompson, Comte maintained that women were naturally more emotional and caring, whereas men were more rational. These and other beliefs are brought forward today in various forms of discrimination that challenge the success of NSMs. Women are a particularly important group to analyse, not only because they comprise half the population, but also because the problems of inequality faced by women are complex, given the high level of diversity among them (Baker et al. 2009). Furthermore, focusing on women highlights the problems of diversity, inequality and discrimination that occurs within all groups. As Baker et al (2009) states, women are not just women, they may also be advantaged or disadvantaged by their class, age, ethnic origin, sexual orientation or disabilities, for example. This is seen most clearly in the fact that certain women are subordinate to other women: working class to middle class; those with disabilities to those without disabilities; and those who are lesbian to those who are heterosexual. In other words, gender-based inequalities interact with other inequalities. For Parsons (1954), a division of labour based on sex was functional for maintaining the integration of the family (Wallace 1989,

p. 105). As Wallace stated, he viewed the husband's instrumental specialisation and the wife's expressive specialisation as being 'functional' for marital solidarity because it eliminated competition between husband and wife. He further argued that adult women having equal careers to men would only be possible after profound alterations to the structure of the family. While Parsons clearly did not advocate such a radical restructuring of the family, he leaves the future open and acknowledged that the changes necessary to bring about equality would indeed be profound.

To this day, feminists continue to address the question 'What about women?'. Germov (2014, p. 31) identifies feminism as a broad social and intellectual movement that addresses many issues from a range of academic disciplines. Despite the diversity of approaches, however, feminist perspectives all highlight the importance of the patriarchy. Feminists, according to Germov (2014), argue that social structures are patriarchal, with social institutions such as the legal, health and education systems (as well as wider culture) reflecting sexist values that support the privilege of men.

As previously stated, there are still many areas in modern society in which women and girls experience unequal treatment. According to the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) (2017), Australian women are paid 17.5 per cent less than men for doing the exact same work. This means they would have to work an extra 64 days a year for equal pay. Furthermore, one in two mothers experience workplace discrimination as a result of pregnancy or parental leave; one in three women aged 15 years or over have experienced physical violence in the last five years; and one in five have experienced sexual violence. In addition, findings suggest domestic and family violence is the leading preventable cause of death, disability and illness in middle aged women, and mothers are spending more than twice as many hours each week looking after children compared to fathers (AHRC 2017). While conflict regarding gender is ongoing in Australia, it is important to note that the rise of feminism is intertwined with the rise (and success) of postmodernism and modernity. Although inequality still very much exists, postmodern feminists stress that women are using their agency, namely the differences among them, to mediate, resist and, in some cases, overcome patriarchy within Australian society (Germov 2014).

It is often said that greater equality is impossible because people are not equal, but this is unfounded. As Wilkinson & Pickett (2009, p. 232) argue, equality does not mean being the same, and greater equality is the gateway to a society capable of improving the quality of life for all. Despite the inequalities faced by women and feminist movements throughout history, there are stories of success and a great deal of social change has been achieved thus far. This is important to understand when determining the prospects of future social change in Australia.

The evolution of women's rights in Australia owes much to successive waves of feminism and the women's movement. Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and, to a lesser extent the 1990s, many initiatives were put in place in the areas of health, work, law, education, and welfare, which attempted to redress the gender imbalance between power and opportunity (Skwirk 2017). Women began to infiltrate areas of power that had previously been closed to them, and some

attempted to use this power for the benefit of women in general (Germov 2014). Some of these efforts included the establishment of women's health clinics around the country, shelters, and half-way houses for women escaping domestic violence; and official rights, equal pay, and paid childcare. Further, laws encouraging equal opportunity were enacted around the country, and girls were encouraged to study in traditionally male-dominated fields, like sports and science (Skwirk 2017). On June 24, 2010, Julia Gillard became Australia's 27<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister, and the first woman to hold the office. She was elected unopposed by the Parliamentary Labor Party (National Archives of Australia 2017). For the first time, Australia had a female Prime Minister, a female Governor-General and a female Premier. It was a historic occasion for the country, and one that is still being celebrated by Australian women today (Andrew 2017). If Australian society can continue to overcome the barriers and challenges associated with discrimination and inequality, NSMs like the feminist movement need only continue their efforts, before future success and social change inevitably occurs.

The aims of this essay were to substantiate the claims that movement and society are two sides of the same coin; that the conflictual representations of society are reflected in the expressions of changing forms and content of movements; and that as the world continues to develop, social change will continue to take place, and inequalities will continue to rise and fall. A brief overview of the history of social movements, particularly the French and Industrial Revolutions, established that these were the first times in history when a collective group of people successfully overcame a perceived inequality, resulting in social change. Discussing the rise of feminism gave insight to the political, social and economic inequalities challenging the success of New Social Movements, and the history of women's rights in Australia was used to determine the prospects of these and future social movements achieving their desired change(s).

## List of References

- Alexander, J & Thompson, K 2008, *Sociology: Culture and Society in Transition*, Paradigm Publishers, Boulder.
- Andrew, N 2017, *Australia's First Female Prime Minister*, Success Women's Network, viewed 7 June 2017, <https://successwomensnetwork.com.au/australias-first-female-prime-minister/>
- Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) 2017, *Women's Rights*, viewed 1 June 2017, <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/education/students/hot-topics/womens-rights>
- Baker, J, Lynch, K, Cantillon, S & Walsh, J 2009, *Equality: From Theory to Action*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Bartos, O & Wehr, P 2002, *Using Conflict Theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Comte, A & Thompson, K 1976, *Auguste Comte: The Foundation of Sociology*, Nelson Print, London.
- Germov, J 2014, *Second Opinion: An Introduction to Health Sociology*, 5<sup>th</sup> edn, Oxford University Press, Victoria.
- Healey, J 2014, *Gender Discrimination and Inequality*, The Spinney Press, Thirroul.
- Hughes, C 2002, *Key concepts in feminist theory and research*, Sage Publications, viewed 28 May 2017, doi: 10.4135/9780857024459.
- Hunt, J 1998, *The French Revolution*, Routledge, London.
- Joas, H & Knöbl, W 2009, *Social Theory: Twenty Introductory Lectures*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Marx, K & Engels, F 1933, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Arrow Editions, New York.
- More, C 2000, *Understanding the Industrial Revolution*, Routledge, London.
- National Archives of Australia 2017, *Julia Gillard*, viewed 7 June 2017, <http://primeministers.naa.gov.au/primeministers/gillard/>
- Parsons, T & Bale, R 1954, *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process*, The University of Michigan, Michigan.

Sing, R 2001, *Social Movements Old and New: A Post-Modernist Critique*, Sage Publications, New Delhi.

Skwirk 2017, *Changing Rights and Freedoms: Women*, viewed 7 June 2017, [http://www.skwirk.com/p-c\\_s-56\\_u-490\\_t-1336\\_c-5136/women/tas/women/australia-after-1945/changing-rights-and-freedoms](http://www.skwirk.com/p-c_s-56_u-490_t-1336_c-5136/women/tas/women/australia-after-1945/changing-rights-and-freedoms)

Temple, L 2014, *Not missing in action: The enduring penalty of 'being female'*, pp. 146-158, viewed 29 May 2017, <http://search.informit.com.au.ezproxy.usc.edu.au:2048/documentSummary;dn=431102239635581;res=IELAPA>>

van Krieken, R, Habibis, D, Smith, P, Hutchins, B, Martin, G & Maton, K 2010, *Sociology*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn, Pearson Australia, Frenchs Forest.

Wallace, R 1989, *Feminism and Sociological Theory*, Sage Publications, California.

Wilkinson, R & Pickett, K 2009, *The Spirit Level: Why Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, Penguin Books, London.