The newness of new social movements: Squaring an intriguing circle?

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**Aims of the research**

According to related literature, new social movements are vastly different from the traditional movements and political order on several fronts. Ideologically, the new social movements represent a fundamental break from social movements in the industrial era. They emphasise quality of life and life-style concerns instead of material gains. In terms of strategies and tactics, they tend to operate outside the establishment, drawing on direct actions, stunt actions and media to make their voices heard (Dalton *et al.*, 1990).

Taken together, new social movements have marked a new epoch in collective actions. However, there are a number of studies which believe that researchers mistook an early phase of movement development for a new historical stage of collective actions (Tarrow, 1998). When the so-called new social movements continue to work, they will gradually lose their idiosyncrasies and develop more formalised rule systems and relationships with government. The truth or otherwise of this perceived transformation makes an important research question because for the past several decades, there are signs that political participation has been steadily waning. On the other hand, many hopes have been placed on new social movements so as to revitalise political interest and participation (Dalton, 2000). This proposed research is to examine whether their hopes are little more than a myth, or their hopes are really premised on a cast-iron ground.

**Conceptual framework**

The focus of this research is whether the longer a new social movement exists, the more likely the movement will lose its distinction. From the perspective of organisation theory, it can be expected that the internal structure is to be significantly driven by the age of an organisation (Downs, 1967). The passage of time exposes the organisation to a wide variety of situations, and it gradually learns how to deal with most of them more effectively than it did in the past. The desire for the reservation and crystallisation of organisational memory causes the organisation to develop a more formalised and institutionalised governing system.

The focus of this research also derives from the resource mobilisation theory. The theory presumes that a requirement for political influence is likely to result in change to organisational form, and that this change in organisational form tends to take the new social movement organisations nearer the typical interest groups (Jordan and Maloney, 1997). First, as the ‘modern’ organisations develop specific policy goals, they have to foster a working relationship with established political authority. However, they cannot bargain like interest groups, because without a highly centralised and cohesive organisation, they are unable to deliver electoral resources. To put simply, they are of little use to the political authority, as they have nothing to offer in return to the governing parties and those in opposition. In this regard, they have to change.
Second, in order to sustain themselves, financially and structurally alike, it is natural for the new social movement organisations to become increasingly bureaucratised and hierarchically controlled. The professional managers dominate the political agenda and organisational operation and concern themselves with marketing, while the grass-root members and volunteers conduct the mundane work of sending in the funds and taking onto the streets under the aegis of the leadership. In actuality, there is not much to glamorise this form of participation as being meaningfully involved in the political process.

Research methods

Before going any further, it is important to point out that the research project is to concentrate the comparative case studies on the field of environmental movements in Hong Kong. This is because environmental movements, in Hong Kong and other countries alike, are widely taken as emblematic of what it means by new social movements. The focus of this research is to examine whether the new social movements, in this case the environmental movements, will slowly lose their distinctiveness as they mellow over a long period of time. To operationalise this research, two kinds of comparative studies are utilised. First, we have to compare the newly emerging environmental groups with the well-established ones. The second approach is that we have to compare the existing structures of well-established environmental groups with their previous modes of operation.

There is another facet related to the issue of operationalisation. In order to evaluate any change in structures, it is possible to use a number of indicators (Kriesi, 1996). For the internal structure, it can use:

- Process formalisation
- Professionalisation
- Division of labour and specialisation
- Hierarchically organised

For the external structure of environmental groups under investigation, this research will use the following indicators to evaluate the extent of change and difference:

- Integration into established systems of interest intermediation
- Conventionalisation of action repertoire
- Moderation of goals and demands
- Commercialisation for the aim of establishing a mass-based organisation

To limit the scope of this research, it is desirable to concentrate on up to five newly-emerging environmental groups and up to five well-established environmental organisations. A number of materials such as annual reports, bulletins and internal documents related to a range of issues such as organisational structures are useful in generating required information. Interviews are useful as well, especially with those who have been in charge of the
organisations for quite a while. The newly emerging groups in the context of Hong Kong include Greensense (established in 2004), Friends of the Harbour (2003), Greeners Action (1998), Clear the Air (1997) and Greenpeace (1997). On the other hand, the well-established groups include Green Power (1988), Friends of the Earth (1983), WWF (Hong Kong) (1981), Conservancy Association (1968) and Hong Kong Bird Watching Society (1957). The process of interviews has already begun, which is expected to complete in September 2009. If it goes to plan, this research project will generate the draft of a conference paper in April 2010.