

## The Self-Organization of Social Movements

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The New Social Movement Approach and the Resource Mobilization Approach are the dominant approaches in social movement research. They focus either on macro-aspects and externalism or on micro-aspects and internalism. This paper suggests that the notion of self-organization is one way of taking into account both internal and external, structural- and action-based aspects of social movements and that it allows a dynamic concept of protest. The emergence of social movements is not determined, but a complex result of crisis, resource mobilization, cognitive mobilization, self-production—searching for singular laws of the emergence of movements is an expression of one-dimensional, linear, and deterministic thinking. Protest and social problems are non-linearly related. Social movements are part of the civil society system, by producing alternative topics and demands, they guarantee the dynamic of the political system. Existing system-theoretic approaches on social movements (Luhmann, Japp, Ahlemeyer, Hellmann) are rather uncritical and ignore the productive relationship between human actors and social structures in processes of social self-organization. Social movements are dynamic communication systems that permanently react to political and societal events with self-organized protest practices and protest communications that result in the emergence and differentiation (production and reproduction) of protest structures (events, oppositional topics, alternative values, regularized patterns of interaction and organization). The dynamic of social movements is based on the permanent emergence and mutual production of protest practices and protest structures. The self-organization of a social movement is a vivid process, it is based on the permanent movement and differentiation of actors and structures that communicate public protest, a social movement is only a movement, as long as it communicates protest and moves itself. In critical phases of protest new social systems of protest emerge whose form, content and effects are not determined, but dependent upon old structures, i.e., old structures enable and constrain new structures. The emergence of new protest issues, methods, identities, structures, and organizational forms starts as singular innovation, if it is widely imitated then it spreads within the protest system and transforms the system as a whole. In terms of Hegelian dialectics this means that novel qualities sublimate the old structure of the total system, i.e., the system is transformed, reaches a higher level, incorporates old qualities, and creates new qualities. In critical phases protest can spontaneously and quickly spread and intensify itself. This reflects the idea of complexity thinking that

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small causes can spontaneously have large effects. The notion of self-organization as the idea of the networked, co-operative, synergetic production of emergent qualities and systems should be employed in order to arrive at a dynamic concept of protest. In order to reflect the increasing complexity of society and the emergence of a stratified knowledge society, a multidimensional model of class that is structurally coupled to the concept of social movements is suggested.

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**KEY WORDS:** social movement; self-organization; protest; social system.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper sets out to give an explanation of social movements as complex, dynamic systems. Questions to which possible answers should be given are:

- How can social movements be explained as social systems?
- What role do social movements play in modern society?
- How does the idea of self-organization relate to the political goals of social movements?
- What broader societal and political implications does the concept of social movements as self-organizing systems have?

The central notion employed for describing social movements as social systems is the one of self-organization that grasps the dynamic, complex, evolving nature of systems in nature and society. The main motivation for taking up this concept is that the modern world is inherently complex and dynamic and that its phenomena can best be explained by concepts that stress permanent changes and networked forms of organization. In the last decades self-organization theory has emerged as a transdisciplinary theory that allows describing reality as permanently moving and producing novelty (“emergence”) (Fuchs, 2003b). Self-organization is a process where a system reproduces itself with the help of its own logic and components, i.e., the system produces itself based on an internal logic. Self-organizing systems are their own reason and cause, they produce themselves (*causa sui*). In a self-organizing system new order emerges from the old system, this new order cannot be reduced to single elements, it is due to the interactions of the system’s elements. Hence a system is more than the sum of its parts. The process of the appearance of order in a self-organizing system is termed emergence. The logic underlying self-organizing systems resembles the dialectical principles of the transition from quantity to quality, negation, and negation of the negation (*ibid.*).

The structure of this paper is made up in such a way that I will first discuss the state of the art of social movement theory and will then introduce my own approach that tries to go beyond the state of the art by describing social movements as self-organizing systems. I will first summarize the two dominant paradigms of social movement research in order work out a theoretical foundation from which

a concept of self-organizing social movements starts (Section 2). I will show that the two dominant approaches have limits that need to be overcome. Then I will develop my own concept of social movements that is based on the idea of social self-organization as a complex, dynamic, productive, evolving process that links human actors and social structures (Section 3). In Section 4, I point out the political implications of the concept of social movements as self-organizing systems for critical thinking.

## 2. BEYOND NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

There are two main approaches on social movement theory, the European New Social Movement approach (NSM) and the US resource mobilization—and political opportunities—approach. Table I shows the main differences.

The NSM-approach stresses that structural conditions and changes of society cause the emergence of social movements. It stems from a structuralist Marxist tradition, thinkers like Jürgen Habermas and Claus Offe have been influenced by the critical theory of the Frankfurt school (Horkheimer, Adorno), Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe come from the intellectual tradition of French structural Marxism (Althusser, Balibar). NSM theorists oppose economic reductionism and class reductionism: the emergence of SMs cannot be explained solely by economic changes and the position of actors in the production process. The NSM-approach stresses non-class issues such as gender, ethnicity, age, neighbourhood, environment, or peace.

Habermas (1981a) distinguishes between the life-world that is structured by communicative rationality, i.e., communicative actions, and state and market that are structured by instrumental rationality, i.e., the steering media power and money. He terms the process of the expansion of instrumental rationality that absorbs the life-world as the colonization of the life-world. SM would be the result of the colonization of the life-world, they would be reactions seeking to re-create lifestyles.

For Laclau and Mouffe (1985) SMs are the result of fundamental changes of social structures. A relation of subordination would be an oppression that is not questioned by the oppressed, a relation of oppression would be an oppression that is challenged by the oppressed and turned into a site of antagonism (*ibid.*, p. 153f). An antagonism would emerge when the identity of a subject is negated either when its rights are called into question (negation of rights) or by contradictory interpellation, i.e., the experience of the self in a contradictory manner, as both inside and outside dominant culture. The Fordist mode of society would have been based on fundamental changes in production and of the nation state that resulted in commodification, bureaucratization, and massification. Capitalist relations would penetrate ever wider spheres of social life, society would transform itself into a big

**Table I.** The Two Main Approaches in Social Movement Research

	New social movements-approach	Resource mobilization approach
Intellectual tradition	Frankfurt school, structural Marxism	Rational choice theory
	Against class reductionism and economic reductionism: gender, ethnicity, age, neighbourhood, environment, peace	Against collective behaviour theory (Durkheim, Smelser, Blumer) that considered SM as irrational and a result of grievances
Main assumptions	Structural changes of society cause the emergence of SMs: colonization of the life-world (Habermas), post-industrial society (Touraine), massification of social life (Laclau, Mouffe)	SM are the result of the successful mobilization of resources and political opportunities. Individuals make cost-benefit assessments in order to decide whether they engage in protest or not. SMs compete against each other for public resources and with other social systems that demand claims upon public resources
Important concepts	Colonization of the life-world Steering media Post-industrial society Historicity Relations of subordination Relations of oppression Hegemony Contradictory interpellation Massification	Selective incentives External resources Personal networks Social capital Mobilizing structures Protest repertoires Political opportunities Frames Leadership Recruitment process Social movement industry Social movement sector
Development Role of struggle	Discontinuity/rupture of society Struggle for the collective control of meaning and new forms of identities	Continuity of social structures Struggles result from the mobilization of resources: Material: money, organizations, manpower, technology, means of communications, media. Non-material: legitimacy, loyalty, social relationships, networks, personal connections, public attention, authority, moral commitment, solidarity
Form Political aspects	Pluralistic, many issue Part of civil society	Competitive Demands to the state

marketplace. SMs would challenge the massification of social life and homogeneous ways of life and culture, they “are the expression of forms of resistance to the commodification, bureaucratization and increasing homogenization of social life itself” (ibid., p. 165).

For Touraine (1985) SMs are the result of a fundamental discontinuity, the transformation from industrial society to post-industrial society. The new social formation would in fact be hyperindustrial and have a high capacity to act upon itself (self-production). He calls this society also programmed society because it would industrialize aspects of life such as information, consumption, health, scientific research, and general education. “Programmed society makes individuals, goods, and ideas circulate much more intensely than did earlier societies” (Touraine, 1988, p. 105). Post-industrial society could be defined by the technological production of symbolic goods, research and development, information processing, biomedical science and techniques, and mass media would be its four main components (Touraine, 1985, p. 781). Each type of modern society (commercial, industrial, post-industrial) would be based on a central conflict and a single social movement that animates these struggles: commercial society—struggles for civil liberties and political rights, industrial societies—class struggle, post-industrial society—struggles over the production of symbolic goods (information, images, culture, Touraine, 1985, p. 774). In post-industrial society struggles would be more based on biological and natural entities such as the environment, gender, youth, age and they would be struggles for happiness (Touraine, 1988, p. 111). SMs would contest the social form of historicity, i.e., “the set of cultural, cognitive, economic, and ethical models by means of which a collectivity sets up relations with its environment; in other words, produces [...] a culture” (Touraine, 1988, p. 40). SMs would “contend in order to give these cultural orientations a social form” (Touraine, 1988, p. 42), they are “the fabric of social life” (Touraine, 1981, p. 94). Touraine (1985, 1988, p. 63 ff) distinguishes between collective behaviour (conflicts that defend or want to reconstruct society), struggles (conflicts that aim at changing decisions), social movements (conflicts that seek to transform the relations of domination applied to cultural resources), social anti-movements (defensive), cultural movements (oriented on cultural values), and socio-historical movements (not located within a field of historicity, but in the passage from one type of society to another) as forms of conflict, but he fails to clarify the differences and the reasons why such a differentiation should make sense. It is strange, e.g., that he considers the women’s movement as a cultural movement and the labour movement as a social movement. In order to avoid confusion a broad concept of social movements seems feasible. For Touraine social movements are synchronic (oriented on the control of cultural patterns such as knowledge, investment and ethics, Touraine, 1985, p. 776) and historical movements diachronic. But social development is not pre-determined, hence one cannot decide in advance which movements fundamentally change society and which ones do not and such a

conceptual differentiation does not make sense. All movements have values and fight for change, the distinction between social, historical, and cultural movements is artificial.

For Offe (1972) NSMs are caused by political and institutional conditions of life and reproduction of labour that do not provide people with more life chances and satisfactions than are needed for their valorization in production processes. Offe (1985) argues that both increasing resources (time, money, education) in the case of the new middle class as well as a deprivation of resources in the case of the old middle class and decommodified and peripheral groups are aspects of NSMs. Offe (1985) distinguishes between socio-political movements which want to establish binding goals for a wider community and are recognized as legitimate, and socio-cultural movements which want to establish goals which are not binding for a wider community (retreat) and are considered as legitimate. Further forms of non-institutional action would be private crime (non-binding goals, illegitimate) and terrorism (binding goals, illegitimate).

The RM-approach comes from the tradition of Rational Choice Theory that considers actors as rationally calculating gains and losses that stem from certain potential actions and make choices for or against certain actions based on such calculations. They oppose collective behaviour approaches that consider SMs as irrational reactions to social stratification and grievances (deprivation theories).

Individuals would make a cost-benefit assessment for deciding whether they engage in protest or not. John McCarthy and Mayer Zald compare social movements to economic organizations and argue that competition for resources is a central aspect of a social movement organization (SMO). Based on this economic reasoning is the elaboration of the concepts of Social Movement Industry and Social Movement Sector: "All SMOs that have as their goal the attainment of the broadest preferences of a social movement constitute a social movement industry (SMI)—the organisational analogue of a social movement" (McCarthy and Zald, 1977, p. 1219). "The social movement sector (SMS) consists of all SMIs in a society no matter to which SM they are attached" (McCarthy and Zald, 1977, p. 1220). It is strange to compare SMs to markets and competition because there have always been critical social movements in modern society that have in fact challenged the capitalist logic of capital accumulation and competition.

In RM-theories SMs are explained as the result of the successful mobilization of resources and political opportunities by rational actors. Such resources would both be material and non-material (material: money, organizations, manpower, technology, means of communication, mass media; non-material: legitimacy, loyalty, social relationships, networks, personal connections, public attention, authority, moral commitment, solidarity). RM approaches argue that affluence and prosperity tend to foster the emergence of SMs. Other important influencing factors would be the role of leaders and the type of recruitment process.

Representatives of RM approaches use categories such as selective incentives, external resources (Oberschall, 1973; McCarthy and Zald, 1977) and mobilizing structures (McCarthy, 1996) in order to characterize structures that enable the mobilization of SMs. They oppose the idea that impoverishment and deprivation cause the emergence of SMs and argue that an increase in resources and structural conditions that enable protest and are mobilized are the decisive aspects of SMs. Also personal networks (McAdam, 1988; Diani and McAdam, 2003) and social capital (Diani, 1977) have been considered as important mobilizing resources.

Deprivation theory and the RM approach are both deterministic, there are examples in history for deprivation (labour movement, anti-slavery movement, miners' strike against Thatcher) and for resource mobilizations (transition of the Soviet Union) as well as combinations of the two factors (civil rights' movement, students movement) that have resulted in protest. Protest is in modern society always based on social problems and the successful mobilization of resources.

Another factor influencing the development of SMs are methods of protest. Tilly (1978, 2004) has argued that protest repertoires enable and constrain protests, repertoires would be ways and routines of collective protest. Another important influencing factor related to methods of protests is the way that protests are symbolically framed in the public (Snow *et al.*, 1972; Zald, 1996; McAdam, 1996b). "Frames are the specific metaphors, symbolic representations, and cognitive cues used to render or cast behavior and events in an evaluative mode and to suggest alternative modes of action" (Zald, 1996, p. 262).

Political opportunity approaches as a specific type of RM theories argue that new political opportunities enable the emergence of SMs (Eisinger, 1973; McAdam, 1996a; Tarrow, 1998). They argue that the conditions for protest are best when political systems are opening up and when there is a balanced mixture of political opportunities and political constraints. This approach is rather deterministic, it is better to assume that political opportunities and political repression are one of several influencing factors. McAdam (1996a) identifies four types of political opportunities: the relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system, the stability or instability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity, the presence or absence of elite alliances, the state's capacity and propensity for repression. Reducing social movements to political opportunities means to question the autonomy, power, and importance of civil society and to consider them as a pure side-effect of institutionalized political groups.

Table I summarizes the two approaches, according to the dimensions intellectual tradition, main assumptions, main concepts, the role of development, the role of social struggle, the form of social movements, and political aspects. The NSM approach focuses on macro-aspects of social movements, i.e., changing social structures that result in the emergence of protest. It analyzes why SMs exist and rather neglects the question of how a SM acts. The RM approach focuses on

micro-aspects of social movements, i.e., organizational features and strategies of protest groups. It analyzes how SMs are organized and act.

SMs are understood as demands for change, but the origin of this demand is not analyzed in analytical terms. The RM approach neglects the question of why a SM acts. The New Social Movements approach comes from the line of Critical Marxist thinking and dialectical reason, its focus is on describing social movements as forms of critique of society that aim at emancipation and the enhancement of society by causing structural transformations. The Resource Mobilization Approach stems from the tradition of functionalist thinking that considers human action as selfish and is based on instrumental reason that aims at the maximization of personal benefits. Instrumental reason has been considered by Critical Theory as an expression of the dominant logic and line of thinking of modern capitalist society because it explains human action as being essentially focused on deriving profits (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944). Capitalist society aims at the maximization of money profit, but this does not mean that the instrumental reason that underlies this society is a fundamental principle of all human thinking. The criticism that Critical Theory advances is that uncritical theories and thinking describe instrumental reason not as an expression of the dominant logic of modern society and hence as historical, but as the essence and nature of human action. Hence such thinking would be an ideology. I believe that this critique also applies to the RM approach. I believe that social science should not only analyze and explain society, social action, and social systems, it should also be a critique of dominant structures and ideology and hence point out that there are suppressed worldviews, groups, and structures in modern society. From such an understanding of social science I feel more associated with the critical tradition that underlies the NSM approach and more reserved towards the RM approach. Hence my own ideas on social movements are closer to the first tradition and understands the development of social theory in general and a theory of social movements in particular as a contribution for strengthening critical thinking in society. But I think that the NSM approach lacks a powerful concept for describing the internal dynamics of social movements, there is not much focus on social movements' organizational structures. I believe that the notion of social self-organization allows to both describe the internal dynamics of social movements and to consider these systems in line with critical thinking. In the next section I will focus on the dynamics of social movements by describing them as self-organizing systems, then I will explain which critical political implications such a concept has.

### **3. SELF-ORGANIZATION, COMPLEXITY, AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

I want to start with a collection of definitions of social movements that allows to synthetically identify central aspects of social movements.



“Social movements can be viewed as collective enterprises seeking to establish a new order of life. They have their inception in a condition of unrest, and derive their motive power on one hand from dissatisfaction with the current form of life, and on the other hand, from wishes and hopes for a new system of living. The career of a social movement depicts the emergence of a new order of life” (Blumer, 1969, p. 99).

A social movement is a form of “purposive collective actions whose outcome, in victory as in defeat, transforms the values and institutions of society” (Castells, 2004, p. 3).

Social movements are “networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities” (Diani, 1992, p. 13).

“A social movement is a collective action trying to defend intrinsic normative standards against their strategic-utilitarian instrumentalization by modernizing elites. Each stage of modernity has its specific social movement and its specific dominant elite (social classes). Antagonistic interpretations of a moral order constitute class antagonisms” (Eder, 1993, p. 114).

Social movements are “best conceived of as temporary public spaces, as moments of collective creation that provide societies with ideas, identities, and even ideals” (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991, p. 4).

“A social movement is a sustained and self-conscious challenge to authorities or cultural codes by a field of actors (organizations and advocacy networks), some of whom employ extrainstitutional means of influence” (Gamson and Meyer, 1996, p. 283).

A social movement has the function of “converting the negation of society in society into operations” (Luhmann, 1984, S. 214).

A social movement “is a set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of society. [ . . . ] A Social Movement Organization (SMO) is the complex, or formal organization which identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement [ . . . ] and attempts to implement these goals” (McCarthy and Zald, 1977, p. 1217f).

“I define analytically a social movement as a form of collective action (a) based on solidarity, (b) carrying on a conflict, (c) breaking the limits of the system in which action occurs” (Melucci, 1985, p. 795) .

“A social movement consists of two kinds of components: (1) networks of groups and organizations prepared to mobilize for protest actions to promote (or resist) social change (which is the ultimate goal of social movements); and (2) individuals who attend protest activities or contribute resources without necessarily being attached to movement groups or organizations” (Rucht, 1996, p. 186).

A social movement consists of “(1) campaigns of collective claims on target authorities; (2) an array of claim-making performances including special-purpose associations, public meetings, media statements, and demonstrations; (3) public representations of the cause’s worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment” (Tilly, 2004, p. 7).

A social movement is “the effort of a collective actor to take over the ‘values’, cultural orientations of a society by opposing the action of an adversary to whom he is linked by relationships of power” (Touraine, 1995, p. 239).<sup>3</sup>

“A social movement is a collectivity acting with some continuity to promote or resist a change in the society or group of which it is a part” (Turner and Killian, 1987, p. 166).

Based on these definitions one can identify important aspects of social movements:

- The negation of dominant values, institutions, and structures
- Social change
- Collective action
- Adversary
- Resistance
- Dissatisfaction
- Hopes and wishes for change
- New sensitivity
- The search for new identities, collective meanings and collective values
- Methods of protest
- Goals
- Extra-parliamentary opposition
- Civil society
- Public sphere
- Reactivity and proactivity
- Alternative political issues, values, goals
- Protest events and protest campaigns
- Communicative practices and strategies
- Social problems and grievances
- Networks of activists and networks of groups
- Perception and interpretation of social problems
- Mobilizing and demobilizing structures
- Moral outrage
- Triggers of protest and contagion effects
- Mobilization
- Conditions of opportunities and constraints/repression
- Degree of penetration of society with one-dimensional consciousness and technological rationality (degree of introjection)

I believe that these aspects of social movements can be theoretically combined by describing social movements as self-organizing systems. A self-organizing

<sup>3</sup>Similarly: Social movements are “actors, opposed to each other by relations of domination and conflict, have the same cultural orientations and are in contention for the social management of this culture and of the activities it produces” (Touraine, 1988, p. 9).

system is based on an internal logic, it produces itself, but it is not a closed, autonomous system, its internal production processes are based on an open character, i.e., such a system is coupled to an environment, it exchanges resources with the environment in processes of import and export. I suggest that the notion of social self-organization is one way of bridging the gap between internalism and externalism and structure and action in social movement research.

Complexity thinking stresses that there are non-linear relationships between causes and effects: one cause can have many different effects and one effect can be the combined result of many causes, small causes can have large effects and large causes small effects, i.e., effects are conditioned, but not determined by given structures, they have a certain degree of unpredictability and chance (Fuchs, 2003b). Applying this idea to social movements shows that there can be no singular social condition (such as deprivation or resource mobilization) that automatically results in the emergence of protest. The emergence of social movements is not determined, but a complex result of crisis, resource mobilization, cognitive mobilization, self-production—searching for singular laws of the emergence of movements is an expression of one-dimensional, linear, and deterministic thinking. Japp (1984) has argued that social movements are not caused externally, but are self-organizing systems because they would produce themselves. Social movements would not have rational and external causes, they would be their own cause. Social problems would not be the cause of social movements, the latter would rather try to construct problem interpretations. Social movements cannot be explained by singular objective conditions, it is not determined if and when a social movement will emerge, if certain social conditions are given. But social movements are not fully autonomous and closed systems, they are connected to social problems and the antagonistic subsystems of modern society. They are based, but not determined by social antagonisms. That they are complex and non-linear means that they have complex and non-linear causes, not that they are autonomous: a certain state of antagonistic social structures can have different effects, protest is one of many possible effects that will emerge if certain other conditions such as resource mobilization and cognitive liberation can be achieved. Social movements are self-producing because they produce their own identity, structures, goals, and collective practices in cyclical, reflexive and self-referential processes, but they are open and not closed systems.

The political system is constituted by dynamic processes in which political actors interact in such a way that political power structures are permanently differentiated, i.e., new aspects emerge. Political structures (power structures, political institutions, political decisions) enable and constrain political practices that result in the differentiation of political structures that again conditions further political practices, etc. This mutual productive process of political actors and political structures can be seen as a dynamic process of political self-organization (cf. Fuchs, 2004, 2005d).

Antonio Gramsci stressed that the state means “political society + civil society” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 263). It consists of two major subsystems: the system of political rule and the system of civil society. The system of political rule is made up by the parties that are represented in parliament, official political institutions such as parliament, government, ministries, public offices, police, military, courts, and the secret service. This system forms the core of the process of constituting and enacting laws. Civil society is the system that is comprised by all non-parliamentary political groups. These groups either run for elections, but are not represented in parliament due to their reaching not enough votes or not running for elections because they rely on non-parliamentary forms of political practice. Political groups that are part of civil society represent certain aims and interests and try to influence power relationships in such a way that their ideas and interests are represented. Their chief practice is the lobbying for certain political ideas (lobbying does not only include procedures of influencing powerful political actors that are based on personal and cultural relationships as well as on economic resources, also all forms of protest can be considered as a type of lobbying for certain ideas and material interests). The self-organization of the state system can only be accomplished by complex interactions between the system of political rule and civil society, it is not solely comprised by interactions within the first. The two subsystems are structurally coupled, i.e. each perturbs the other, but cannot determine the practices and structures of the other to a full extent. Lobbying as the main practice of civil society is a perturbation for the ruling system, it will result in a change of existing structures, i.e., a sort of response, but it is not determined how this change will look like, to which extent it will take place and whether it will be a rather important, major change or a rather unimportant, minor change. In many nation states, referenda that can be initiated by civil society are a sort of non-parliamentary political procedure. Lobbying also includes the membership in political parties of members of a group that belongs to civil society. Political events that take place within the system of rule (new laws, appointments, etc.) perturbate civil society in the sense that the organizations of civil society form opinions and views concerning these events. Political events stimulate political practices. It is not determined whether or not this will result in support or opposition. Certain political events can result in political mobilizations within civil society that support or protest against certain events in the system of rule. It is not determined in advance what will happen, how civil society will react to new emergent properties of government. It is determined that such emergence will result in further political practices within both subsystems of politics, but not in which ones. The political system contains both aspects of chance and necessity. As an effect of the emerging new networked forms of politics that are due to the changes that have affected society during the last 30 years, the growth rate of the research literature on civil society and governance (a term employed for describing political practices that are organized within civil society and significantly diverge from

governmental practices) has massively increased. There are various ideas about governance and civil society, most scientists involved with these issues agree that both notions have to do with voluntary political action in order to advance common purposes.

Social movements are collective actors and social systems, they are part of the civil society system. They form dynamic social systems that permanently produce and reproduce events and political topics that signify protest against existing social structures and the search for alternative goals and states of society. Social movements are a reaction to social problems, an expression of fear and dissatisfaction with society as it is and a call for changes and the solution of problems. The ecology movement is a reaction to the problem of ecological degradation, the women's movement is a reaction to gender-specific oppression, the anti-racist movement is a reaction to the problem of racial discrimination, antifascism is a reaction to the problem of right-wing extremism and neo-fascism, the human rights movement and the civil rights movement are reactions to the problem of human rights violations, the anti-globalization-movement is a reaction to the global problems of poverty, lack of political participation and to the negative consequences of neoliberal policies, indigenous movements and landless movements are reactions to the problem of land expropriation, the homosexual movement is a reaction to the problem of sexual discrimination, the antipsychiatric movement is a reaction to the discrimination of the mentally ill, the disability rights movement is a reaction to the discrimination of the disabled, the open source movement is a reaction to the problem of the valorization and privatization of knowledge and public goods, the peace movement is a reaction to the global problem of war, the student movement is a reaction to the problem of cutbacks in the educational sector, the unemployment movement is a reaction to the problem of unemployment, the youth movement and alternative (sub)cultures are reactions to the problem of the lack of perspectives for young people in late capitalism, esotericism, sects, and spiritualism are reactions to the crisis of religion and belief systems caused by individualization processes, Third World initiatives are a reaction to the problem of poverty, fundamentalist movements are reactions to global cultural homogenization, neofascist movements are reactions to the failures of overcoming fascist traditions and thinking and to the problems of modernization, etc.

Social movements are political answers of civil society to ecological, economic, political, social, and cultural problems of modern society. The problems produced by the antagonistic structures of society are a condition for the emergence of protest that organizes itself within the civil society subsystem of the political system. Social problems and protest are couplings of societal subsystems with the political systems (or a self-coupling of the political system in the case where protest is an answer to political problems).

Each social movement is reactive in the sense that it reacts to strains and protests against the existence of certain social structures, but each is also proactive

in the sense that it wants to transform society and holds certain values and goals that shall guide these transformation processes.

The emergence of a social movement presupposes social problems as a material base. Protest is a negation of existing structures that result in frictions and problems and a political struggle that aims at the transformation of certain aspects of society or of society as a whole. Protest is the essential activity of social movements, hence “protest movement” is a term that is similar to the one of “social movement”, but stresses the central activities of such social systems. Neither the aggravation of problems nor the structural opening of new political opportunities or the increase of resources for protest movements results automatically in protest. “In some cases strains will persist for decades, only giving way to movement formation when a shift in opportunities or resources makes this possible. In other cases opportunities and resources may be in abundance, but there will be no movement until new strains emerge. In other cases still all the pieces may be in place save for a precipitating event which sets them alight, and so on” (Crossley, 2002, p. 188). The transition in the Soviet Union and the student movement of 1968 are examples of protests in situations of increasing political opportunities and resources, whereas the emergence of the labour movement and the anti-globalization movement can be considered as reactions to aggravating social stratification.

Only if social problems are perceived as problems and if this perception guides practices, protest emerges. Hence “cognitive liberation” and rebellious consciousness are necessary (McAdam, 1982). The difference between objective structures and subjective expectations is an important aspect of protest. “When the ‘fit’ between objective structures and subjective expectations is broken the opportunity for critical reflection and debate upon previously unquestioned assumptions is made possible” (Crossley, 2002, p. 185). As long as one-dimensional consciousness dominates a social system, protest cannot emerge even if social problems get worse. That protest and social problems are non-linearly related has been one of the central insights of Herbert Marcuse (Fuchs, 2005b). In late capitalism ideologies such as racism, the performance principle, consumerism, esotericism, and competition are factors that limit and constrain the possibilities for social protest. Protest presupposes social problems, the perception of these problems as problems by human actors, the assessment that these problems are unbearable and a value-based indignation that activates and mobilizes practices. That a problem is perceived as a problem that should be solved does not automatically result in the emergence of protest, but maybe in attempts to organize protest. Such attempts are only successful if possibilities and resources for protest can be found and mobilized.

Identities are meanings by which social groups define themselves. Social movements question dominant values and identities, they produce values and goals that contradict dominating structures and that shape their identity. These values and goals guide collective practices that aim at transforming the institutions and

values of society. Historically such practices have been demonstrations, boycotts, strikes, sit-ins, blockades, civil disobedience, refusals to obey orders, sabotage, desertion, demolition of property, kidnapping, terrorism, armed struggle, etc. There are non-violent and violent forms of protest. Protest is a collective search for and a production of alternative meanings and values. Each protest group has a certain identity, an adversary, and goals. These three aspects guide practices of protest. Jürgen Habermas has in this context stressed the importance of cultural aspects of NSMs. “In the past decade or two, conflicts have developed in advanced Western societies that deviate in various ways from the Welfare State pattern of institutionalised conflict over distribution. They no longer flare up in domains of material reproduction; they are no longer channelled through parties and associations; and they can no longer be allayed through compensations. Rather, these new conflicts arise in domains of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialisation; they are carried out in sub-institutional—or at least extraparliamentary—forms of protest; and the underlying deficits reflect a reification of communicatively structured domains of action that will not respond to the media of money and power. The issue is not primarily one of compensations that the welfare state can provide, but of defending and restoring endangered ways of life. In short, the new conflicts are not ignited by distribution problems but by questions having to do with the grammar of forms of life” (Habermas, 1987, p. 392).

Social movements are political phenomena and part of civil society, as oppositional and alternative movements (i.e., they formulate alternatives, the dominating condition of society) they have an important role in modern society because by producing alternative topics and demands they guarantee the dynamic of the political system that is given by the confrontation of dominating structures by opposition. The political system is based on the dispute between different values and views. Conflict guarantees possibilities of change and dynamic. A political system without opposition is static and totalitarian, protest and critique are important aspects of democratic political systems. The role of protest movements in modern society is that they point out ways of social change and transformation.

Social systems are dynamic, this dynamic character can be achieved by the mutual production of human actors/groups and social structures (cf. Fig. 1). This process can be termed social self-organization or re-creation of a social system (Fuchs, 2003a). The synergies released by communication processes between human actors result in the production and reproduction of social structures, these structures enable further practices and communications by which social structures can again be produced and reproduced, etc. This process is self-referential, recursive, and cyclic, social systems permanently change themselves, their dynamic is given by an endless emergence of social structures from practices and communications of human actors. Social structures and human actions/communications produce each other mutually. Anthony Giddens has termed this cyclical process the duality of structure and has considered structures as medium and outcome of



**Fig. 1.** Social self-organization.

human practices, they enable and constrain actions. “According to the notion of the duality of structure, the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organise” (Giddens, 1984, p. 25, for a discussion of how Giddens’ structuration theory fits into the framework of a theory of social self-organization cf. Fuchs, 2003a, b).

The concepts of self-organization and social auto-poiesis are useful for describing protest systems as dynamic systems. In doing so one must specify an entity that is permanently produced and reproduced by social movements. Ahlemeyer (1995) has argued that the autopoietic element of production of social movements is mobilization-oriented communication. Such communication would always call on someone to act, it would suggest to others that they should act alongside the movement. A movement would only exist as long as there is mobilization. Mobilization would mobilize mobilization, hence it would be self-referential. Social movements would be systems that self-referentially process operations of mobilization. Mobilization surely is an important aspect of social movements, but there are e.g. also other forms of mobilization such as concerts, festival, and election campaigns. Hence mobilization isn’t the specific characteristic of social movements. Luhmann (1986, p. 237ff)<sup>4</sup> and Japp (1986, 1996) have suggested that the autopoietic element of production is fear-oriented communication. The idea is that fear in society is the topic of communication of social movements, they translate fear into protest communication, and that such communications produce fear in society that enable further communications about fear. Fear would produce fear and be a self-referential phenomenon. Fear is a everyday phenomenon for many people, it is not exclusively a function of protest systems, hence the differentia specifica of protest does not seem to be fear. The main problem of these system-theoretic approaches is that they argue that self-organizing social movements

<sup>4</sup>For a detailed discussion of Luhmann’s remarks on social movements see Hellmann (1996a, b). In later works Luhmann has argued that social movements produce protest, call for responsibility, want to generate public attention for problems caused by function systems (dysfunctions), are a form of self-description of society, test reality, and communicate alternative realities (cf. Luhmann, 1996, p. 175–200).



(and social systems in general) are forms of communication that self-referentially produce further communications. But a communication does not produce communication, human beings enter social relationships where they jointly communicate in processes with other human beings and enable further actions, social relationships, and communications. What is missing is the productive relationship between human actors and social structures in processes of social self-organization.

Communication organizes collective practices of protest movements such as demonstrations, petitions, boycotts, civil disobedience, media and information work, publications, discussions, etc. These collective practices of social movements (which form collective actors) produce and reproduce as part of the system of civil society alternative and oppositional topics and values in the political public sphere. Hence they have a communicative function in society, they communicate and describe antagonisms of society that have resulted in social problems as well as alternative social structures as possible solutions. They want to produce public attention for topics and problems that are ignored and not communicated by dominant actors and institutions, they are a form of alternative political communication. Social movements fulfil the role of being a non-institutionalized civil-society mechanism of self-criticism of society. Based on actual political and societal events and the identity of a movement, protest practices and protest communication are enabled which result in the production and reproduction of protest structures, events, regularized interactions, protest topics, and protest values that enable the reproduction of identity and communication of the movement, etc. Protest is not a singular event, it normally takes on the form of a continuous succession of protest events that stretches in time, it is organized in the form of campaigns. Protest movements are dynamic communication systems that permanently react to political and societal events with self-organized protest practices and protest communications that result in the emergence and differentiation (production and reproduction) of protest structures (events, oppositional topics, alternative values, regularized patterns of interaction and organization). The dynamic of social movements is based on the permanent emergence and mutual production of protest practices and protest structures. Protest practices are forms of non-parliamentary action and communication of social groups that are aimed at the transformation of society or a social system, question and criticize dominant relationships and structures, react to certain frictions of society, and suggest alternative solutions to phenomena that they consider as social problems. Protest structures are political events, topics, and values produced by protest practices that question the status quo of a social system or society, identify frictions and problems, and suggest alternative solutions to these identified problems. A protest group or movement exists as long as there are actors that communicate protest oriented on certain topics. Dynamic is an important aspect of protest, protest exists only as long as there is mobilization of actors, resources, meanings, knowledge, and public attention that enable practices and structures of protest. If the goals of the movement are reached or it

is externally or internally smashed or its resources are exhausted, the movement merges, it ceases to exist and stops communicating. The self-organization of a social movement is a vivid process, it is based on the permanent movement and differentiation of actors and structures that communicate public protest, a social movement is only a movement as long as it communicates protest and moves itself.

There are two levels of social self-organization: (1) On the synchronous level a complex system permanently autopoietically produces and reproduces itself, (2) on the diachronic level order emerges from disorder in critical points of development. Complex systems maintain and permanently produce themselves, but due to their contradictory form they sooner or later enter phases of instability (points of bifurcation) where the system state is disordered, chaotic, non-determined, and open—novelty emerges. Expressed in the terms of dialectical logic one can say that due to quantitative intensification systemic contradiction aggravate and finally result in a situation where quantity turns into quality and the system sublates itself. The new system is a continuation as well as the result of the elimination of the old system. The form of the emerging novelty is neither arbitrary nor determined, but shaped by a dialectic of chance and necessity, i.e., the structure of the old system determines a space of possibilities for the structure of the new system, but how the new system is exactly structured is uncertain, not pre-determined and decided in a point of bifurcation.

The totality of all protest groups of society forms the subsystem of social protest. The role of this self-organizing social system in society is that it communicates oppositional values and goals in the political public sphere. Protest system is just another expression for the system of civil society. The emergence of social movements is closely coupled to societal development and the emergence of social problems. A critical phase of the system of social protest emerges if social antagonisms and problems are considered as unbearable, i.e., a critical mass of people is dissatisfied with the structure of society, the number of opponents of certain structures has increased to such an extent so that dissatisfaction and a will for change can be experienced. Such a critical phase is not the necessary result of an aggravation of social antagonism (such as e.g., the intensification of poverty, unemployment, or environmental degradation), but the result of the perception and the consciousness of the aggravation of an antagonism. Herbert Marcuse's insight that manipulation, control, and technological rationality can forestall protest is still very important in this context (cf. Fuchs, 2005b, c). The antagonistic structure of society is a foundation, i.e., a necessary condition of protest, but it is not a sufficient condition. Protest depends also on the possibilities and conditions of struggle and on the consciousness of these possibilities. Liberation must be socially possible and humans must have understood the reasons for the existence of social problems, they must have the desire for change, they must feel the need for social transformation and possess the consciousness of the possibilities of

liberation. Liberation has both material and cognitive aspects that must coincide in order to result in concrete attempts of liberating practice. Only if such a coincidence is given, the system enters a critical phase and protest emerges. Date, time, form, and result of protest are not determined, but emerge from protest practices and communications that produce synergetic results. Productive communication is an important feature of protest movements. “Multitudes intersect with other multitudes, and from the thousand points of intersection, from the thousand rhizomes that link these multitudinous productions, from the thousand reflections born in every singularity emerge inevitably the life of the multitude. The multitude is a diffuse set of singularities that produce a common life; it is a kind of social flesh that organizes itself into a new social body” (Hardt and Negri, 2005, p. 349). In critical phases of protest new social systems of protest emerge whose form, content and effects are not determined, but dependent upon old structures, i.e., old structures enable and constrain new structures. A new order of protest emerges, i.e., the social system of protest is fundamentally transformed, a new protest movement or a new network of protest movements emerges.

Struggles of social movements are a necessary condition for social change, but the outcome of these struggles is not pre-determined. It can be successful in terms of effecting social change to different degrees ranging from hardly any changes to more fundamental changes in the institutional settings of society. The protest system as a whole is like society a dynamic evolving system that has its own laws of movements that are structurally coupled to the overall evolution of society. From time to time new issues, structures, identities, organizational forms, and methods of protest emerge in the system and transform the overall system. These transformations are due to societal changes that demand adaptation of the protest system to changing economic, political, cultural, technological, and ecological conditions. The emergence of new protest issues, methods, identities, structures, and organizational forms starts as singular innovation, if it is widely imitated then it spreads within the protest system and transforms the system as a whole, novel qualities sublimate the old structure of the total system. In terms of Hegelian dialectics this means that novel qualities sublimate the old structure of the total system, i.e., the system is transformed, reaches a higher level, incorporates old qualities, and creates new qualities.<sup>5</sup> That novelty emerges does not mean that old forms, methods and structures of protest vanish, but that new qualities are added that enable new collective practices and structures of protest. The evolution of the protest

<sup>5</sup>Sublation is the English translation for the German term “Aufhebung” (cf. <http://www.hegel.net/en/sublation.htm>) which has three meanings that Hegel has employed: 1. To eliminate, 2. To conserve, 3. To lift something up to a higher level. Sublation is a combination of the terms substitution, lifting, and conservation/preservation. For Hegel the negation of the negation is the third step in dialectical development (the first and the second one are identity and negation), it involves all three dimensions of “Aufhebung” at once.

system has both external and internal aspects, it is caused to certain degrees by both changes in the societal environment of movements and processes of internal communication, co-operation, conflict, competition, adaptation, innovation, and negotiation. I want to give a concrete example of the evolution of the protest system: The insurgency of the Mexican Ejército Zapatista De Liberación Nacional (EZLN) against impoverishment, neoliberalism, NAFTA, land expropriation, and for freedom, dignity, justice, human rights, and democracy has resulted in the emergence of a global solidarity movement that makes use of the Internet. The EZLN has been characterized as the first informational guerilla (Castells, 2004) and as the germ cell of the anti-globalization movement. One can argue that the EZLN and their supporters have been early adopters of new forms of organization and protest that make use of Cyberspace, they innovated protest, cyberprotest and cyberactivism have within the following decade spread throughout the whole protest system and resulted in the emergence of virtual forms of protest and protest-co-ordination. This does not all mean that all protest repertoires are today virtually mediated, but that the Cyberspace has added a new dimension of protest that has transformed the overall system of protest.

Members of social groups communicate in the form of conflicts, alliances, splittings, networks, joint demonstrations, petitions, etc. The same is true for communication between protest groups, i.e., there is both intra- and inter-systemic protest communication. The system of social protest is dynamic, i.e. the groups organized in it communicate in ways that allow certain degrees of spontaneity of the system. Hence social protest is frequently undetermined and unpredictable. The system of protest changes permanently, new alliances, networks, demonstrations, forms of protest, boycotts, alliances, petitions, declarations, etc. emerge permanently, old alliances and networks disappear, etc.

The emergence of order in complex systems is triggered by small singular events that result in small disorder that intensifies itself and cause phases of instability where novelty emerges. Social protest is conditioned by social structures and social antagonism, but triggered by singular events. On December 1st, 1955 Rosa Parks, an old black lady in Montgomery, Alabama, refused to give her bus seat to a white man and was arrested. This event sparked off large protests and the emergence of the civil rights movement. The social conditions of segregation were considered as being unbearable any longer at these times, a singular event that could not be predicted and that had non-determined outcomes triggered social protest.

Social development cannot be steered and forecast, due to the rising complexity and globalization of society we are confronted with an end of certainties—indeterminism, irreversibility, chance, and non-predictability shape society today. Chance is an opportunity, liberation cannot be centrally steered, it can only be self-organized in decentralized processes. In critical phases protest can pullulate. This reflects the idea of complexity thinking that small causes can spontaneously

have large effects. Herbert Marcuse has described the intensification of protest as a domino effect. “Any spectacular victory of the rebellious have-nots in any one place would activate their consciousness and their rebellion in other places as well” (Marcuse, 1966, p. 67). “What is happening is the formation of still relatively small and weakly organized (often disorganized) groups which, by virtue of their consciousness and their needs, function as potential catalysts of rebellion within the majorities to which, by their class origin, they belong” (Marcuse, 1969, p. 50). “The process of internal disintegration may well assume a largely decentralized, diffuse, largely ‘spontaneous’ character, occurring at several places simultaneously or by contagion” (Marcuse, 1972, p. 42). Marcuse describes decentralized forms of protest that start on a small local scale, spread out, and intensify themselves. In complexity thinking one terms such phenomena butterfly effect, intensification, and non-linear causality. A recent British empirical study of protest has shown that contagion effects are important aspects of protest, i.e. that protests can temporarily raise the protest potential of the public as a whole (Sanders *et al.*, 2005).

Similar formulations can be found in the works of Hardt and Negri: “Extensively, the common is mobilized in communication from one local struggle to another. Traditionally, as we have noted elsewhere, the geographical expansion of movements takes the form of an international cycle of struggles in which revolts spread from one local context to another like a contagious disease through the communication of common practices and desires. Slave revolts spread throughout the Caribbean in the early nineteenth century, revolts of industrial workers expanded throughout Europe and North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and guerilla and anticolonial struggles blossomed across Asia, Africa, and Latin America in the mid-twentieth century” (Hardt and Negri, 2005, p. 213). “Eventually, perhaps, the seismic vibrations of each protest will resonate with the others, amplifying them all in coordination, creating an earthquake of the multitude” (*ibid.*, p. 269).

The emergence and growth of social movements is a process of spontaneous self-organization that has its roots in the antagonistic structure of modern society, is triggered by certain political or societal events, and is based on antagonisms, the conscious perception of antagonisms as unbearable social problems, and the mobilization of resources that enable protest.

What’s new about New Social Movements? For Touraine the novel aspect is that today’s movements are purely social. Laclau and Mouffe argue that the novelty of SMs is due to their feature that they question new forms of subordination that are not defined by class, but by, e.g., sexuality, gender, ethnicity, and nature. Society would today be based on a plurality of antagonisms that manifests itself in separate struggles, the autonomization of spheres of struggles, and a plurality of subjects that opens up the possibility for a radical, pluralistic democracy. For Offe new aspects are that NSMs are not socio-economic groups acting as groups,

but on behalf of ascriptive collectivities, that they are concerned with not purely economic issues, that autonomy and identity are their central values, and that they have a high degree of informality, spontaneity, and a low degree of horizontal and vertical differentiation. Klaus Eder argues that new aspects are new issues, new social cleavages, new hopes for the collective realization of the predicaments of society, and anti-naturalist standpoints that consider nature as a goal and not as a determinant of social action.

In my view there are several novel aspects about the New Social Movements:

- **Non-economic issues:** They more than the labour movement confront non-material issues such as peace, gender, democracy, sexuality, peace, nature, race, human rights, etc. Nonetheless property and poverty are still important issues of protest. Whereas old social movements concentrated mainly on topics that concern the form and distribution of the appropriation of nature as productive force and means of production, New Social Movements are also concerned with the effects of appropriation on society and nature and with human values (such as human rights and “good life”) and non-material human life conditions (such as gender, sexuality, and race). There is a shift from a predominantly economic focus towards cultural issues.
- **Grass-roots Organization:** They frequently have decentralized, self-organizing, networked forms of organization that are different from the centralistic forms of organization of traditional unions and left-wing parties of the working class. Their cooperative and self-organized forms of organization anticipate a cooperative and participatory society.
- **Perception of non-economic issues:** Antagonisms such as gender-, sex- and race-based discrimination are older than capitalism, but in early capitalism they have hardly been recognized as social problems and issues of protest. Hence New Social Movements do not confront new antagonisms, but their protest is oriented on antagonisms that have existed in prior phases of capitalism and society, but have not been perceived as antagonisms and problems. Only in the case of ecological devastation and the knowledge gap one can speak of truly new antagonisms that have emerged in 20th century capitalism.
- **Openness and culture:** Many social movements (such as the ecology movement and the peace movement) do not have exclusive membership criteria that are determined by social position (e.g., being a worker), but are inclusive and open. One can join by sharing certain values and cultural models (“cognitive membership”), cognitive membership does not necessarily correspond with activism. This is not true for all New Social Movements, e.g., parts of the radical feminist movement and the gay/lesbian/transgender-movement are strictly identity-based and

exclusive. Many of the new movements do not have strict rules of membership, but fuzzy borders, participation replaces membership.

In summary, I have argued that the notion of social self-organization allows describing social movements as dynamic systems that permanently react to societal phenomena and problems by proactively producing and reproducing protest practices and protest structures. Protest forms the central aspect of social movements, it is a conjunction of practices and structures that question dominant structures, worldviews, ideologies, and practices. I will now outline the political implications of this concept of social movements for a critical theory of society.

#### **4. THE CRITICAL AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF CONSIDERING SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AS SELF-ORGANIZING SYSTEMS**

In Section 2, I have mentioned that I am interested not just in a theory of society, but in a critical theory of society. My main motivation for trying to combine critical social theory and self-organization theory is that I think that the idea of self-organization has important critical and political implications because it allows stressing the importance of participation and grassroots democracy that form two political goals that critical theories support. The most important tradition of critical thinking is the Frankfurt School/Critical Theory approach that has been advanced by thinkers such as Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer, and Jürgen Habermas. During the last years my work focused besides the notion of social self-organization also on the foundations and implications of Critical Theory, predominantly in the tradition and version of Herbert Marcuse (cf. Fuchs, 2002a, b; 2005b, c). Mainly Marcuse and Horkheimer have been involved in explaining the foundations of Critical Theory and in describing the essence of the notion “critical”. The two main works focusing on these issues are “Philosophy and Critical Theory” (Philosophie und kritische Theorie) by Marcuse (1937) and “Traditional and Critical Theory” (Traditionelle und kritische Theorie) by Horkheimer (1937) that have both been published in the Frankfurt School’s Journal of Social Research. In summary, the main moments of Critical Theory are (cf. Fuchs, 2005c, p. 43–49):

- A dialectical critique of society does not focus on that which exists in society, but on the possibilities of existence. It identifies moments and movements in society that negate dominant structures and open up possibilities for a Hegelian negation of the negation of existing structures.
- Critical theory is a lever of possible practice.
- It identifies differences of Essence and Appearance.

- It is concerned about the situation of human existence and is oriented on the improvement of human existence and happiness for all.
- It points out tendencies and real possibilities of development and human intervention, conditions and perspectives of human practice.
- It transcends concrete Reality and anticipates possible forms of Being.
- It comments on the concrete forms of Being.
- It develops categories that questions the world that is and that which it has done to humans.
- The language of critical theory questions one-dimensional thought by creating a linguistic and theoretical universe that is complex and dialectical.
- Given categories and societal facticities are not considered as natural, but as historical. Critical theory is a deconstruction of ideologies.
- It argues for humane conditions so that humans are reconciled with societal Being that has been estranged from them.
- For critical theory the human being is more than an exploitable object.
- Critical theory argues that happiness, self-determination, and freedom can only be achieved by a transformation of the material conditions of existence.
- It stresses the importance and power of imagination for anticipating possible futures.
- Its goal is a reasonable society, an association of free people based on a sustainable utilization of technical means. It starts from the judgement that human life is liveable or can and should be made liveable and that in a given society there are specific possibilities for improving human life and specific ways and means for realizing these possibilities.
- Critical theory takes partisanship for suppressed humans.
- It strives for a condition without exploitation and suppression and for the emancipation of humans from enslaving relationships.
- It comprehends societal relationships as totalities.
- It points out the irrationality of the existing rationality and the rationality of irrationality in existing society.

Critical theory stand in the tradition of Marx who argued that critique ends with the insight that “man is the highest essence for man—hence, with the categorical imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, abandoned, despicable essence” (Marx, 1844, p. 385).

I will now outline how my concept of social movements as self-organizing systems relates to critical thinking. In the German-speaking world the dominant strand of social systems theory is the one of Niklas Luhmann and his followers. Hence it makes sense to take a look at how Luhmann sees social movements.

Niklas Luhmann argues that social movements are alternatives without alternatives (Luhmann, 1996, p. 75ff), that they protest against the functional



differentiation of society (ibid., p. 76), operate within society against society (ibid., p. 103, 204), have no alternatives to offer (ibid., p. 104), fetishize opposition and alternative thinking (ibid., p. 159), are made up by a notoriously mentally instable public (ibid., p. 204), stage provocation as end in itself (ibid., p. 206), possess no analytical depth and don't know why something is as it is (ibid., p. 207), stage protest as pseudo-events (ibid., p. 212), are a form of resisting communication against communication (ibid., p. 214), are a disturbing aspect of modern society (Luhmann, 1984, p. 545), and act as negators that weaken the affirmation of society (ibid., p. 549f). For Luhmann protest movements are reactive, aimlessly, and dangerous. Each protest movement has values and certain political goals, hence it wants to change society. Social movements are not reactive, but active and proactive. Luhmann's characterization aims at a discrediting of protest, if the latter is not seen as a positive function of society, alternatives are considered as undesirable. A society that forestalls critique is a totalitarian society, a theory that considers critique and opposition as undesirable is an affirmative and totalitarian theory. The role of sociology in society is critique and reflection of society, a pure description of society as it is as the best form of society is uncritical and affirmative. For Luhmann the function of protest movements is that they convert the negation of society in society into operations (ibid., p. 214). According to Hegel a contradiction is not purely negative, but a determinate negation, i.e. a contradiction results in the negation of the negation, it is sublated and produces positive results. Protest movements are a negation of existing structures and values, but they strive for changing society, i.e. for a negation of the negation and for sublation. They are movements because they move society and want to guarantee dynamic change.

The Habermas/Luhmann debate has shown that there is a difference between critical thinking and functional thinking (Habermas and Luhmann, 1971). Habermas' main criticism of Luhmann is that the latter considers society as instrumental and describes it as it is and not as it could be. Luhmann is only interested in describing society, whereas Habermas argues that ignoring social problems and aspects of how to improve society and how to advance human interests and human emancipation means to reduce sociology to the logic of instrumental and functional reason. Habermas says that Luhmann ignores the intersubjective and democratic dimensions of social relationships, i.e., that consensus and participation can be achieved by communicative action in ideal speech situations that satisfy the four validity claims of truth, truthfulness, rightness, and comprehensibility. Habermas considers Luhmann's theory as technocratic and functional, i.e., oriented on a logic that only wants to improve the functioning of the system and is blind for human interests. Luhmann argues that modern society is too complex for allowing discursive decision taking. For Luhmann human beings are outside observers of social systems, not active participants. It is no wonder that based on such a dualist concept of society he is blind for social problems and human interests.

For Habermas the lifeworld consists of the private sphere and the public sphere, these two parts would in modern society be colonized by money and power which results in cultural homogenization, a lack of public discourse, and a centralization of decision power (Habermas, 1981b, Vol. 2, pp. 449–488). In the administered society (Adorno) there would be a lack of self-determination and freedom of action (Habermas, 1981b, Vol. 1, p. 470). I would term the two colonizing processes commodification (Habermas prefers to speak of monetarization, cf. Habermas, 1981b, Vol. 2, p. 566) and bureaucratization. Habermas' colonization hypothesis builds on Critical Theory's insight that instrumental reason and the cultural industry produce a one-dimensional society, false needs, and false consciousness, and on Max Weber's critique of the centralization of power. Habermas' approach is close to critical thinking, Luhmann's close to instrumental thinking.

An alternative to instrumental frameworks for systems theory has been provided by approaches such as Critical Systems Thinking, Critical Systems Heuristics, Social Systems Design, and Soft Systems Methodology that have tried to integrate critical thinking in the tradition of Habermas and systems thinking. They can be considered as an incorporation of Habermasian ideas into systems theory.

Two of the five commitments of Critical Systems Thinking (CST) are critical awareness and dedication to human emancipation (Jackson, 1991). CST rests "upon Habermas' theory of human interests as mediated through the system of system methodologies" (Jackson, 1991, p. 83). CST is "dedicated to human emancipation and seeks to achieve for all individuals the maximum development of their potential" (ibid., p. 85). It especially tries to advance the emancipatory interest (which is one fundamental human interest besides the technical and the practical interest) of humans by "denouncing situations where the exercise of power, or other causes of distorted communication, are preventing the open and free discussion necessary for the success of interaction" (ibid., p. 85). CST sees itself in the service of a more general emancipatory project (ibid., p. 86). "Critical systems thinking, and the thrust of Total Systems Intervention (TSI) therefore, is emancipatory in that it seeks to achieve for all individuals, working through organizations and in society, the maximum of their potential. (. . .) The exercise of power in the social process can prevent the open and free discussion necessary for the success of interaction. Human beings have, therefore, an 'emancipatory' interest in freeing themselves from constraints imposed by power relations and in learning, through a process of genuine participatory democracy, involving discursive will formation, to control their own destiny" (Flood and Jackson, 1991, p. 95f). I believe that one major parallel between CST and Critical Theory as defined by Marcuse and Horkheimer is that both question one-dimensional thinking and argue for more plurality and complexity of social structures, thinking, knowledge, and worldviews, and that for both critique suppression of human and societal potentials that are ideologically forestalled, as well as the development of these potentials are important.

Werner Ulrich (1987) has stressed that his Critical Systems Heuristics (CSH) are grounded in models of rational discourse and practical philosophy of thinkers such as Habermas. CSH provides a methodology for strengthening mutual understanding and participatory communication in social systems by entering into a discourse about system boundaries and boundary conditions/judgments. Emancipation is an important aspect of the boundary questions that the CSH methodology provides. Gerald Midgley (1996) has pointed out that both CST and CSH have philosophical roots in Habermas' critical theory.

John Mingers (1980) has stressed that Peter Checkland's Soft Systems Methodology and Habermas' critical theory are to a certain extent similar because they both "deny the claim that rationality must remain divorced from the domain of values, and both are attempting in different ways to achieve precisely this bringing together. Both aim to unite theory and praxis and develop a rational approach to the realm of communicative interaction in order to bring about change in the world and help people solve their own problems" (Mingers, 1980, p. 9). They would both align themselves with the people they study and study for them.

For Banathy (1996) the aim of Social Systems Design is to contribute to the emergence of a self-governing and self-creating society. Hence its overall goal is participatory democracy. "The notion of 'empowering' people to make decisions that affect their lives and their systems is a core idea of true democracy. Much of this power today is delegated to others. (. . .) In order for the design to be authentic and sustainable, it has to be genuinely participative. It has to involve people from the various levels of the society and draw upon their individual and collective intelligence, aspirations, and creativity" (Banathy, 1996, p. 344, 347).

Habermas argues that his critical theory of communicative action is based on Marx's critique of capitalism, it criticizes societies that do not make use of the learning capacities that they have and that surrender to an unguided increase of complexity, and it criticizes scientific approaches that cannot deconstruct the paradoxes of societal rationalization because they consider complex societies only in abstract terms and neglect these societies' historical constitution (Habermas, 1981b, Vol. 2, p. 549f). This means that Habermas understands his theory as a critique of the suppression of societal potentials and of ideologies that legitimize such developments. The four systemic approaches that I have discussed provide to a certain extent different methodologies, goals, and principles, but they share an understanding of systems thinking as empowering people to participate in social systems and strengthen communicative discourse and participatory democracy in social systems. They are all critical in the sense that they question the asymmetrical distribution of resources in and the undemocratic, hierarchic design of social systems. For me their philosophical foundations are on the one hand related to Habermas' stress on advancing participatory democracy by communicative action, and on the other hand also to Marcuse's and Horkheimer's philosophical framework of Critical Theory because they question coercive social structures and

want to advance human emancipation. The elements of ideology critique and the deformation of thinking by instrumental reason are not so much present in the critical systemic approaches as in the ones of Marcuse, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Habermas, they all share the insight that science should empower individuals to develop suppressed human and societal potentials. What is missing in my view is an elaboration of how exactly critical systems theories are related not only to Habermas' works but also to the critical theories of Marx, Marcuse, Adorno, and Horkheimer.

My own approach is much closer related to the four critical system theories just outlined than to Luhmann's social systems theory because I feel that it is important that social theory advances a socially and ecologically sustainable design of social systems and society and criticizes instrumental thinking. For me the difference between instrumental and critical thinking is that the latter incorporates emancipatory political goals and wants to empower people in achieving liberation from domination and heteronomy. For me Critical Theory and Critical Systems Theory aim at an ecologically and socially sustainable society, i.e., a society that advances sustainable development of the ecological, technological, economic, political, and cultural systems of society in the sense of biological diversity, technological usability, wealth and social security for all, participation for all, as well as cultural wisdom and unity in diversity as overall goals and guidelines for practice. Critical thinking criticizes thinking that advances or supports structures that are detrimental to achieving sustainability, it deconstructs approaches as ideologies that legitimize domination, exploitation, and suppression. Liberation and emancipation means the critique of coercion and the advancement of the sustainability of society understood in the general sense just outlined. Based on such an understanding of critical thinking and Critical Systems Theory I now want to outline the political implications of my concept of social movements as self-organizing systems for critical thinking.

I feel more comfortable referring to Marcuse, Adorno, and Horkheimer than to Habermas because I consider Habermas' notion of systems as being of limited value and think that Critical Theory's notion of totality that they have derived from Hegel's and Marx's thinking is more suitable for a critical systems theory. I feel especially attracted by Marcuse's version of Critical Theory because he is much less pessimistic than Adorno and Horkheimer and aimed at a realistic dialectic balance of optimism and pessimism that stresses both opportunities and risks of social systems. For Habermas systems are social relationships co-ordinated by the media money and power. He sees the systems concept related to instrumental reason and opposes it with the critical idea of a lifeworld of communicative discourse that has been colonized by systems in capitalist society. "Habermas's conception of systems is a narrow one. It derives from Durkheim, Parsons, and Luhmann almost exclusively; it neglects complex systems theory and autopoietic systems; it does not consider the theory of general systems of Churchman and Ackoff" (Bausch,

1997, p. 165). Habermas' theory lacks a universal concept that can explain the common ground of society and social relationships. If the concept of systems is defined on a very general notion, one can describe society on a more general level that allows the distinction of different types of societies and systems (such as closed systems, coercive systems, capitalist systems, heteronomous systems, rigidly controlled systems, deterministic systems, purposive systems, heuristic systems, open systems, purposeful/purpose-seeking systems, lifeworld systems, participatory systems, etc.), the critique of coercive settings of society, and the advancement of liberating settings.

There are some system theories that have in common that they associate an ethical vision of a better society with the notion of social self-organization (e.g. Böcher, 1996; Bühl, 1991; Espejo, 2000; Hörz, 1993; Schlemm, 1999; Zeyer, 1997). They are not so much interested in a functionalist interpretation of the concept that describes how society reproduces itself and how society *is*, they are interested in visions, utopias and in how society *could be*. Such approaches define social self-organization in terms of co-operation, participation, grass roots democracy, respect, solidarity, responsibility, co-operation, and tolerance. In terms of dialectical philosophy that argues that there is an Essence behind the Appearance of things one can say that participatory, co-operative types of self-organization can be considered as the true essence and highest forms of social self-organization. This assumption has political and ethical implications because it implies that if we assume that society and social systems are self-organizing systems they need to be designed in sustainable and participatory ways in order to correspond with the true essence of the notion of self-organization. Hence one can argue in Hegelian terms that what is needed is a design of social systems that enables the correspondence of Essence and Existence/Appearance of social systems and social self-organization. For Hegel and Critical Theory the difference or correspondence of Essence and Reality of a thing is a criterion for the true or false character of this thing. Many social movements are grassroots organizations and aim at a participatory and sustainable society. Hence their structures and ideas are close to the political implications of the self-organization concept and they anticipate desirable design settings of society.

Social movements are self-organizing systems, the actors engaged in these systems have political beliefs according to which they want to change society. A social movement is a social system that is characterized by a certain protest identity, i.e., a specific form of giving meaning to the world and its problems and by specific practices. It is a collective subject whose identity and practices oppose dominant values, institutions, and relationships and want to realize alternative values and goals. From the common actions and communications of the people organized in a protest group emerge collective practices and events that produce and reproduce alternative values, topics and goals in the political public sphere. The interactions in social movements often have a co-operative grass roots character that is different

from the traditional centralistic style of organization in parties, bureaucracies, and labour unions. Not all protest movements are organized in a decentralized and direct democratic manner, but many of them are indeed characterized by a flat organizational structure. Because of the fact that the concept of self-organization is closely related to the ideas of self-determination, self-management, and the reduction of heteronomy and centralized authority, one can argue that grass-roots social movements are the embodiment of an authentic form of self-organization that could serve as a model for the participatory design of society. The fascination that these movements exert on many people is partly due to the fact that they make grass roots democracy vivid, noticeable, and sensible within a world of heteronomy and alienation. Direct democratic practices are an anticipation of an all-embracing democratization of society, a germ form of a global democracy and a practical expression of democratic values.

Protest means the questioning of dominant values and structures by collective practices that suggest alternative values and goals. Not all protests are critical because critique involves elements such as the concern for the state of humanity, the pursuit of self-determination, freedom, happiness, and participation for all human beings, the striving for the enhancement of the situation of humanity, the commitment for the realization of emancipatory/sustainable possibilities of societal being, the struggle for a state without domination and exploitation, for the emancipation of the human being from enslaving relationships, and for a co-operative society (Fuchs, 2005c, chapter 1.6.). Protest negates certain existing social structures and stands up for the negation of the negation (sublation) of certain social antagonisms that cause social problems. Protest groups such as ATTAC or Amnesty International are forms of critical protest, whereas e.g. Al Qaida, neo-fascists, and anti-abortionists are non-progressive and non-critical protest groups. Protest as a social form is not automatically progressive and critical, what is decisive is the content of protest. Critical protest is oriented towards the future, it identifies possibilities within existing society that help to improve the situation of mankind and to reach a higher and progressive level of societal organization. Conservative protest movements are not oriented towards the future, but towards the past or that which actually exists, i.e. they do not want to substitute structures of domination by co-operative and participatory structures, but rather want to conserve, transform, or rebuild domination. Eder (1993) argues that social movements are those movements that are directly and indirectly related to modernization, hence collective mobilizations such as Fascism would not form social movements. I do not see the advantage of using a narrow definition of social movements, excluding regressive and right-wing mobilizations might be politically pleasing, but creates confusion, hence it seems to me to be more feasible to distinguish between critical and uncritical social movements.

Self-organizing systems are complex networks of entities that synergetically interact and produce novelty. A network is a set of interconnected nodes that are

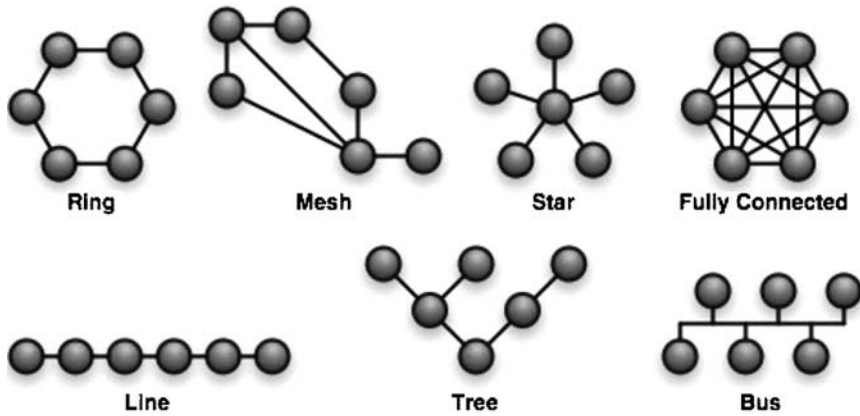


Fig. 2. Network topologies.

structurally linked and communicate in certain ways. The type of nodes depends on the type of network, in the Internet the nodes are computer networks, in a local area network the nodes are singular computers, in a business network the nodes are corporations, in a networked enterprise the nodes are production units, in a social network the nodes are human beings or groups. All social systems are networks because they communicatively link human individuals, hence in society we find networks that link individuals and networks that link groups or larger social systems, there are both inter- and intra-organizational networks. There are different types of networks, a network can either be rather centrally and hierarchically organized or decentralized and non-hierarchical. Figure 2 shows different types of network topologies. Mario Diani (2003b) has suggested that movement cliques, policephalous structures, wheel/star structures, and segmented, decentralized structures are types of networks that matter in social movement analysis. A social movement is not a singular group, but a network of protest groups that are communicatively linked. It can have different degrees of centrality and hierarchy, there can either be a rather polycentric, pluralistic, and decentralized structure or there can be central actors that dominate the movement. The degree of decentralization refers to the distribution or control of resources such as knowledge, activists, money, decision power, infrastructure, technologies, and cultural definition power.

There is a tendency of globalization in modern society, Postfordist capitalism is a globalized, transnational, knowledge-based type of system. Especially the economy is organized around global networks of capital, production, and knowledge. Business firms are increasingly organized in a decentralized way that allows them the openness, adaptation, and flexibility that is needed for the accumulation

of capital. Strategic business are a form of networking between different firms, also on an intra-organizational level, there is a tendency towards networked forms of organization and management. Postfordist capitalism is based on strategies of capital accumulation that make use of decentralized networks and a transnational logic. Manuel Castells speaks in this context of the emergence of a network society (Castells, 2000).

Postfordist social movements are faced with networked forms of domination, as a reaction to the new logic of domination their logic of organization is frequently based on decentralized transnational networks, global communication based on the Internet, and virtual forms of protest (cyberprotest, cyberactivism) and of co-ordinating protest. “It takes a network to fight a network” (Hardt and Negri, 2005, p. 58). The emergence of a decentralized, global Empire has been challenged by a decentralized global protest movement that calls for global participation and global co-operation and suggests that the degree of democracy, justice, and sustainability of globalization should be increased. The organization principle of the movement is the one of global networked self-organization. For many of the activists the protests anticipate the form of a future society as a global integrative and participatory democracy. The movement is a yearning for a society in which authorities don’t determine the behaviour of humans, but humans determine and organize themselves. It opposes globalization from above with self-organized forms of globalization from below. The “anti-globalization movement” that should better be called a movement for an alternative, democratic form of globalization is a transnational decentralized networked form of protest (Fuchs, 2005a). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1976) have termed such decentralized networks rhizomes, progressive networked social movements are rhizomatic types of protest. The globalization movement is a network of groups from different social movements, a global network of networks, a movement of social movements, a universal protest movement, a coalition of coalitions that aims at reclaiming the common character of goods and services (ibid.). Whereas old social movements such as the working class movement and its unions and parties are rather centralized star- or tree-shaped forms of networks, the anti-globalization movement and other New Social Movements show tendencies towards rather fuller connected forms of networks that are transnationally distributed. Charles Tilly (2004) suggests that both claimants and objects of claims of social movements can be organized on a local, regional, national, or international level and that there is a tendency for globalization of both levels. I would add that there are different forms of the globalization of social movements, international movements operate from one country but want to gather worldwide attention for their political goals, multinational movements have relatively autonomous operating sub-organizations in nation states and are held together by overall topics or campaign issues, transnational movements are globally distributed networks that share values, identities, and goals, communicate and organize protests across spatio-temporal distances. Transnational protest can



take on the form of worldwide activists mobilizing for one event or of simultaneous protest events aimed at a similar goal, but taking place at different locations. The WTO protests in Seattle in 1999 were e.g. accompanied by simultaneous protests in more than 80 other cities around the world.

Networks are not surprisingly also a topic in social movement studies (cf. e.g. Diani and McAdam, 2003). “Networks undoubtedly facilitate mechanisms like the mobilization and allocation of resources across an organizational field, the negotiation of agreed goals, the production and circulation of information, all activities which are also essential to any type of coalition, broadly defined; at the same time, however, they also may—or may not—facilitate the circulation of meaning and mutual recognition” (Diani, 2003a, p. 10). The concept of social networks promises dynamic concepts of social movements (Mische, 2003; McAdam, 2003). I would add that also the notion of self-organization as the idea of the networked, co-operative, synergetic production of emergent qualities and systems should be employed in order to arrive at a dynamic concept of protest.

Protest labour is highly communicative and co-operative, protest networks produce knowledge and common values. Protest knowledge is knowledge about social problems and their possible solutions, it is oriented on the solution of social problems, it is critical knowledge if it is oriented on sustainable, humane, and participatory solutions. Existing knowledge is the foundation for further common knowledge and common practices of protest groups, their co-operation is based on knowledge and produces knowledge, protest knowledge permanently sublates itself due to the synergetic effects of co-operation. “There can be no cooperation without an existing commonality, and the result of cooperative production is the creation of a new commonality; similarly, communication cannot take place without a common basis, and the result of communication is a new common expression. The production of the multitude launches the common in an expanding, virtuous spiral. [. . .] there is a reciprocal exchange between the singularities and the multitude as a whole, affecting them both, tending to form a kind of constituent motor. This common production of the multitude implies a form of constituent power insofar as the networks of cooperative production themselves designate an institutional logic of society” (Hardt and Negri, 2005, p. 350). Critical protest labour is reflective and questions one-dimensional logic and instrumental reason. It is organized in the form of networks and is a form of Collective Intelligence or mass intelligence. Collective Intelligence is an emergent social phenomenon where an intelligent behaviour of the system emerges from human communications. Collective Intelligence is “a form of universally distributed intelligence, constantly enhanced, coordinated in real time, and resulting in the effective mobilisation of skills [. . .] The basis and goal of collective intelligence is the mutual recognition and enrichment of individuals rather than the cult of fetishised or hypostatized communities” (Lévy, 1995, p. 13). Collective Intelligence is a form of

communication and co-operation that is oriented on the solution of social problems and the critique of the causes of these problems.

Critique is an important aspect of intelligence, but this quality is as Herbert Marcuse has shown today forestalled in large parts of the working class. Protest and critique is today much more an aspect of New Social Movements than of the working class movement. Collective intelligence and general mass intellect of the working class are possibilities that have not yet been realized.

## 5. CONCLUSION

I have argued in this paper that by describing social movements as self-organizing systems two advantages are gained:

1. Social movements can be seen as dynamic and complex on both a micro and a macro level, they are based on the permanent emergence and reproduction of their self-created protest practices and structures and on an upper level constitute the civil society system of society that guarantees societal dynamics by advancing political opposition, critique, and protest. In comparison to the New Social Movements Approach that concentrates on the macro level of society and the Resource Mobilization Approach that focuses on the organizational micro level, the self-organization approach considers both the internal and the external aspects of social movements by describing both levels as interconnected dynamic systems.
2. Social movements can be connected to the tradition of Critical Theory and Critical Systems Theories because the notion of social self-organization has political implications, it is closely related to categories such as participation, grass roots democracy, and co-operation. By arguing that critical social movements are an embodiment of an original form of self-organization and that their organizational structures and political ideas anticipate desirable settings of society, a critical political dimension that questions coercion, domination, and exploitation and advances ecological and social sustainability emerges.

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