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Decoupling social movements from modernity: a critical reappraisal of Charles Tilly's theory on the origins of social movements

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Abstract
Conventional wisdom situates the historical origins of social movements in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by attributing their emergence to the rise of democracy, capitalism, and the nation-state. In this article, I challenge this scholarly orthodoxy by presenting primary sources and historical scholarship that demonstrate how the German Peasants' Revolt of 1524 and 1525 meets Charles Tilly's criteria for a modern social movement. By challenging the standard narrative of social movements as a product of modernity, this article breaks with the dichotomy between modern and premodern social movements and encourages us to rethink the concept of social movements.

Keywords Social movements · Historical sociology · Origins of social movements · Modernity · Charles Tilly

> The movement of 1525 comprises all aspects of later social movements in Europe: It was not just the origin of European revolutions, but their very essence.
>
> Wilhelm Zimmermann, 1982:20
>
> Over the period from 1760s to the 1830s […] the British created the social movement as a distinctive form of collective action.
>
> Charles Tilly, 1982:28

Introduction

The historical 'origins' of social movements are firmly established. The conventional wisdom was introduced by Charles Tilly who argued that social movements emerged with the simultaneous occurrence of three structural transformations during

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the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: democratisation, nationalization and the development of modern capitalism (Tilly, 1982, 2004a). Similarly, Tilly and Wood (2003:147) situate the origins of social movements in the eighteenth century when "British activists started inventing the social movement" – an invention thought to have taken "shape during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the modern democratic state has evolved" (Johnston, 2014:21). Influential textbooks follow scholarly accounts by introducing students to the idea that "the social movement, as we know it today, is a relatively recent means of organizing for social change" (Staggenborg, 2016:4). We can only speculate whether the absence of studies in social movement scholarship covering a period before the eighteenth century is a consequence of this orthodoxy[1] or whether it reflects a broader "presentism that is sometimes inherent in the study of contemporary social movements" (Berger, 2024:349).[2]

The historical origins of social movements are embedded in the narrative that modern social movements developed because concentrations of power – propelled through democratization, the emergence of the nation-state and capitalism – moved popular interests away from local targets and created new opportunities for collective action. The argument presents a structuralist vision for the emergence of social movements because it assumes that social structures provide the 'ends and opportunities' for localized collective action. While social movement scholars have extensively debated the role of opportunity structures in explaining proximate causes of movement mobilization (McAdam, 1996; Goodwin and Jasper, 1999), the origins of social movements belong to the canon of social movement scholarship as unquestioned historical fact. This may seem surprising given the lively scholarly debates that followed the emergence of 'new' social movements in the 1960s that some observers deemed fundamentally different from their 'old' class-based predecessors (Melucci, 1980, 1981). In the spirit of Craig Calhoun (1993, 2012:135) who challenged the "historical assertion that late twentieth-century social movements are of a fundamentally new kind" by tracing the origins of radical social movements back to the nineteenth century, the even older distinction between 'modern' and 'premodern' social movements deserves equal scrutiny.

In revisiting the historical origins of social movements, sociologists can take inspiration from historians who have not only questioned static and teleological models of history (Berger and Nehring, 2017; Farr, 2000), but have also argued that late medieval revolts reverse the 'premodern'-'modern' divide upheld by Charles Tilly (Cohn, 2012). These revolts were spontaneous rather than planned, economic and political rather than religious, and peaceful rather than violent (ibid.). However, the reluctance of sociologists to build on this body of work in order to challenge the standard narrative about the historical origins of social movements, and to rethink widely adopted definitions of social movements, may not be surprising

[1] A review of top sociology journals published between 2010 and 2024 – including the American Sociological Review, American Journal of Sociology, Social Problems, Social Forces, Theory and Society – along with the leading social movement journal, Mobilization, revealed no study applying social movement theory to case studies from before the eighteenth century.

[2] Generally, the focus is on movements commencing with the so-called 'new' social movements of the 1960s, implying an even more foreshortened perspective (Calhoun, 1993, 2012).

considering the significant empirical challenges associated with historical analyses over the long haul. Indeed, Charles Tilly himself acknowledged that the origins of collective action are "simple to state in principle and complex to show in practice" (Tilly, 1983:467–468). Tilly therefore directed his efforts to quantify how changes in the frequency of strikes, meetings, and violent acts followed changes in structural characteristics like "concentration of power" (Tilly, 1985, 1982). Leaving aside unavoidable limitations of historical data and worries that his broad overview "passes over some important issues which are not central to his own concern" (Briggs, 1995:108), this article takes issue with Tilly's analytical strategy, which does not involve systematic analyses of contentious politics before the period where he situated the rise of the modern social movement.

In contrast to earlier historical work that has challenged Tilly's historical framework en passant or by focusing on particular aspects of his work (e.g. Cohn, 2012; van der Linden, 2009), my approach consists of comprehensively applying Tilly's concept of modern social movements to a case that long predates the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the German Peasants' Revolt of 1524 and 1525. Building on decades-long localized peasant rebellions, the uprising drew as many as 300,000 participants from across the territories of the Holy Roman Empire. Participants called for the abolition of serfdom, fairer distribution of land and resources and the right to appoint and remove their local clergy – a reflection of the religious undercurrents inspired by the Reformation. After months of largely peaceful mobilization the Peasant Revolt was brutally suppressed, resulting in the war-like casualties that shape the collective memory of the 'Great German Peasant War' to this day (Zimmermann, 1982).

Although there may be many suitable cases to develop my argument, two reasons justify the empirical focus on the German Peasants' Revolt of 1524 and 1525. First, the German Peasants' Revolt provides a fair test for the historical claims advanced by Charles Tilly. The Revolt pertains to the same world region and long predates democracy, the nation-state and capitalism. Although some historians label the sixteenth century as 'early capitalism,' this period precedes many features of capitalism that are assumed to have contributed to the rise of social movements. The German Peasants' Revolt therefore provides suitable testing ground for assessing the standard narrative on the historical origins of social movements. Second, the Revolt was documented with numerous primary and secondary sources to draw on. So far, these sources have not been used to systematically investigate the German Peasants' Revolt as a social movement[3] despite Friedrich Engels's (1926:2) early insistence on the class-based character of the revolts whose resemblance with the revolution of 1848-9 "was too obvious to be altogether ignored [...]".

By means of historical scholarship and primary sources, I show that the German Peasants' Revolt of 1524 and 1525 fulfils core aspects of social movements: the Revolt used a modular, cosmopolitan, and – to some extent – autonomous repertoire

[3] One explanation is that Karl Marx (2017) himself dismissed the peasant revolt as pre-bourgeois, even insulting the French peasants as "potatoes in a sack". But the narrative of peasants as backwards goes beyond Marxist dogma, having influenced the great historians Barrington Moore (1966) and Eric Hobsbawm (1971) whose book title "Primitive Rebels" is suggestive.

of contention. Claimants themselves had distinct characteristics: they were worthy, united, numerous and committed. These findings challenge the view of peasant revolts as either premodern[4] expressions of discontent or mere precursors to modern social movements intended "to correct immediate abuses or take revenge on those they opposed, using routines of collective action that were direct, local, and inspired by their grievances" (Tarrow, 2011:42). By demonstrating that the German Peasants' Revolt fulfils Charles Tilly's criteria for a social movement, the analysis challenges the prevailing narrative of social movements as a product of modernity and encourages us to reconceptualize social movements. To overcome the standard model's circularity by tying the definition of social movements too closely to a historical period and to avoid stretching the meaning of social movements, I encourage us to reject the search for ontological meaning in our definitions of social movements. Instead, we may be better served by conceptualizing social movements in terms of family resemblances (Wittgenstein, 1953), or overlapping empirical similarities, at different levels of abstraction.

The analysis extends scholarship that seeks to decenter dominant narratives on the emergence of allegedly modern phenomena. Gorski (2000) has argued that nationalism is not unique to modernity, but that early modern discourses were "no less nationalist than the nationalisms of the French Revolution" (Gorski, 2000:1428). Stasvage (2020) recently suggested that various forms of democracy developed in many parts of the world, not just in ancient Athens. In a similar vein, I show that there are compelling reasons to view the distinction between premodern and modern social movements as untenable, echoing historical scholarship on medieval popular revolt (Cohn, 2012; Hilton, 1973) and calls for a deeper history of social movements (Berger & Nehring, 2017; van der Linden, 2017, 2007).

I begin by sketching the standard narrative about the structural origins of social movements as it was introduced by Charles Tilly. I then elaborate on the various renderings of social movements as modern. Upon outlining the case study and materials used to analyze it, I apply the different elements of social movements to the German Peasants' Revolt. After the falsification exercise, I discuss the implications of the analysis for re-conceptualizing the origins of social movements.

Origins of social movements

Tackling the narrative about the origins of social movements with historical case studies might draw criticism from scholars who do not read Charles Tilly's discussion about the historical starting point of modern social movements as if it is a testable causal narrative. This is understandable because Charles Tilly describes

[4] There is no standardized definition of the term 'premodern'. Some historians use the term for periods before the nineteenth century while others apply it to times before the seventeenth or even the late fifteenth century (Grygiel, 2013:4). The latter definition overlaps with what historians often describe as the beginning of early modern history. However, in this article, I situate 1524 and 1525 in the 'premodern' era to highlight that these years long pre-date the large transformations that gave way to what Charles Tilly called the 'modern' social movement.

broad historical developments as nuanced, multifaceted social processes. Nevertheless, we can discern three causal claims (Tarrow, 2011): Tilly argues that social movement repertoires resulted from "a considerable increase in democracy" (Tilly, 1995:146), the "increasing penetration of the national state into local life" and the rise of capitalism involving the "accumulation and concentration of capital, the proletarianization of the working population, and the increasing prominence of merchants and manufacturers in national affairs" (ibid. 203). These three societal processes – democratisation, the rise of the nation-state and the emergence of capitalism – propelled a concentration of power. "[I]n case after case it became clear" that this concentration of power redirected the interests of people away from "local affairs and powerful patrons" (Tilly, 1983:468), creating new opportunities for collective action (Tilly, 1983).

Democratization

Tilly describes democratisation as "the development of regimes featuring relatively broad and equal citizenship, binding consultation of citizens with respect to governmental policy, personnel, and resources, and at least some protection of citizens from arbitrary actions by governmental agents" (Tilly, 2004b cited in Tilly, 2004a:12–13). The existence of a democratic polity is central to social movements as they assert "popular sovereignty" (Tilly, 2004a:13). The democratic polity falls under one jurisdiction and provides the social movement audience on behalf of which activists make claims to target authorities using a broad repertoire of popular contention. The active participation of citizens in the execution of power and the right to assembly paved the way for social movements that acted in an increasingly 'autonomous' way (Tarrow, 2011). Autonomy was realized through 'citizenship' which comprised the rights for freedom of expression and binding consultations in the form of elections – both features promoted the foundation of social movements as a novel form of claim-making (Tilly, 1993). Governments, in turn, were more likely to listen to popular demands as the rise in parliamentary power created opportunities for extra-institutional influence on politics. As a consequence, parliament became the focal point of political contention, where ordinary citizens could address national political authorities.

Nation-State

Political power was further concentrated through the rise of the modern nation-state. The state became the target of claim-makers whose interests converged around this common target, necessitating a repertoire of contention that was recognizable across geographical areas. In a detailed examination of the formation of the modern social movement in France, Tilly (1985) shows how state-making affected people's interests in different regions thereby giving way to collective action in three main ways; people's interests were affected when the state claimed resources through taxation, when the liberties and independence of communities were threatened by the

imposition of the state, and when the state instilled competition between contenders. Equally important for the creation of the modern social movement repertoire was the buttressing of capital-labor relations that intensified over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Capitalism

With the acceleration and industrialisation of modern capitalism, inequalities between wage laborers and capitalists aggravated, laying bare the competing interests of different social classes. State-making and capitalism, together, not only shaped people's ability to mobilize but also affected the interests of different social groups to engage in collective action. Capitalism restructured property relations by increasing the number of wage laborers who were no longer tied to a specific piece of land which decoupled claim makers from their targets. This new autonomous group of wage laborers was able to organise easily as they moved to the cities where dire economic and social conditions bred common grievances. It was in cities where unions and labor parties formed and started to represent workers in parliament (Tarrow, 2011).

Together these 'mobilizing structures' – democracy, nation-state and capitalism – are believed to have contributed to the emergence of a new type of social movement. The task then was to "match […] the right element of the repertoire to immediate ends and opportunities [with the] limited number of well-known performances repeated with relatively minor variations and chosen with an eye to the audience and the occasion" (Tilly, 1982, 30).

From premodern to modern social movement

In response to the large transformations that occurred in Europe between 1750 and the mid-nineteenth century, an "innovative, consequential synthesis of three elements" occurred (Tilly, 2004a, 3). It consisted of:

> a social movement repertoire, public representation of WUNC: Worthiness, Unity, Numbers and Commitment, and, importantly, a movement campaign. Movement campaigns are "sustained, organized public effort[s] making collective claims on target authorities" (ibid.).

The crucial word in this depiction is *sustained*. Single events on their own are insufficient to qualify as a movement campaign. Rather, petitions, declarations, and mass meetings become aspects of social movements when they are recurrent and engage a range of stakeholders. These include the individuals and groups who make the claims, those to whom the claims are directed, and a wider audience or community that acknowledges them. Some of the tactics like demonstrations or petitions – sometimes called performances – did exist before. They become a component of modern social movements when they are cosmopolitan because they span localities, modular because they could be used across circumstances, and autonomous because

they started on claimants' own initiative (Tarrow, 2011:41; Tilly, 1993; Tilly, 1996). Yet, it is not only the types of claim-making that lend movements of the nineteenth century their modern outlook, but claimants themselves now have distinct characteristics: they are worthy, united, numerous and committed. In short, they have WUNC.

The modern elements of a social movement are best pictured in comparison to their premodern counterparts. Tilly's strategy is to focus on the period of change from the 'old' to the 'new' world. The following schematic illustration taken from Tilly (1985) sketches what his historical work sought to demonstrate empirically (Fig. 1).

Figure 1 shows that the scope of collective action, ranging from "local" and "patronized" to "national" and "autonomous" varies with the degree to which collective action can be conceptualized as "old" or "new". Before the "new" (i.e., modern) social movement emerged as a way for ordinary people to make claims to authority, people rallied where wrongdoers resided rather than at sites of power, limiting the scope of people's actions to specific localities (Tilly, 1982). Local settings like funerals or festivities became the venues where people could collectively express their criticism and ridicule and had the opportunity to prepare their demands to target local authorities (Tarrow, 2011). The orientation of claim-makers to powerholders, as illustrated by the left-hand side of the rectangle, ranges from "patronized" to "autonomous". It captures the idea that social movement actors became increasingly independent, acting without the support of local authorities who spoke on their behalf (ibid.) and moving away from local targets and particular requests that would quickly unravel once granted.

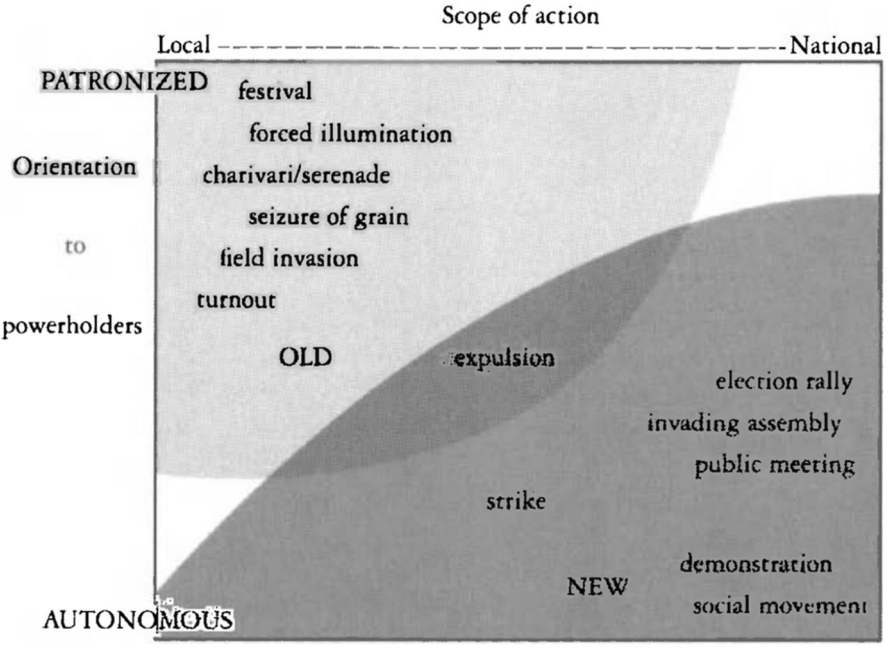

Fig. 1 Tilly's "Old" and"New" Repertoire of Contention (Tilly, 1985:395)

To summarize Tilly's argument on the distinction between modern and premodern social movements: although Tilly acknowledges that ordinary people made their voices heard before the eighteenth century, he argues that their actions were parochial as interests were concentrated in a single community, segmented because people only undertook direct action to achieve their ends but delegated non-local affairs with the support of patrons, and particular because the routines of action varied enormously from group to group (Tarrow, 2011:40; Tilly, 1995). The modern social movement that Tilly saw develop between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was increasingly sustained, displayed WUNC, and was characterized by a repertoire used by people to speak on behalf of a constituency. The historical narrative about the origins of the modern social movement therefore directly relates to Tilly's definition of social movements as a "sustained series of interactions between powerholders and persons successfully claiming to speak on behalf of a constituency lacking formal representation, in the course of which those persons make publicly-visible demands for changes in the distribution or exercise of power, and back those demands with public demonstrations of support" (Tilly, 1982:26).

Insofar as classic definitions of social movements capture collective actions and movement actors that extend beyond Tilly's conception (e.g., Zald & Ash, 1966; Wilson, 1973; Diani, 1992, Snow et al., 2004), scrutinizing whether a particular movement aligns with Tilly's criteria for social movements helps to historically situate various definitions of social movements regardless of whether they are explicitly placed within a historical framework.

Case study and materials

Case description

The German Peasants' Revolt of 1524 and 1525 was one of the most significant popular uprisings in Europe. While it has been viewed for a long time – like most peasant uprisings in history – as an expression of "early-modern backwardness" or "German disunity" (Freedman, 1997:202), historical scholarship has generated a consensus that the German Peasants' Revolt was more than just the "most radical event in German history" (Marx, 1844:65). Even though the German Peasants' Revolt consisted of somewhat loosely connected elements, peasants were united in their criticism of feudal order, territorial states and clerical authority (Scott & Scribner, 1991).

The Revolt of 1524 and 1525 built on decades-long popular resistance and a strong peasant identity. Already in 1502, the Bundschuh movement called for an end to "all oppression and an end to all lordship and authority on the basis of 'divine justice" (Laube, 1975:51). Under the banner of the Bundschuh, peasants defied powerful social structures by collectively mobilizing in 1493, 1502, 1513 and 1517 (ibid., 1975:49). Through the Reformation of 1517, biblical scripture could then be used by peasant activists as a moral benchmark against which authorities were judged (Scott, 1979). Reformation pamphleteers capitalized on peasants' moral sentiments by communicating their message through dialogues that invoked fictive peasant leaders whose anger was favorably portrayed. Pamphlets also stressed the spiritual

oppression of the peasant, so that "nothing was more natural than for peasants […] to apply these images to real instances of material oppression" (Cohn, 1979:11). It only took seven years from the Reformation to the onset of the German Peasants' Revolt of 1524.

Core demands of the revolting peasants, involving up to 300,000 individuals in the territories of the Holy Roman Empire, were formulated in the so-called "Memmingen Articles" which made demands regarding the rights and freedoms of the peasantry. The demands covered property rights, fair trials and exceptions from arbitrary taxation (The Twelve Articles of the Peasants 1525, 1994). The articles were the compressed version of long complaint lists that peasant leaders had compiled (Buck, 1981). Within weeks, they became a "political manifesto and reform program" and "the uniting element" of the German Peasants' Revolt (Schulze, 1987; Scott and Scribner, 1991). The articles were printed 25,000 times and distributed widely in German cities where they were used to formulate more locally specific complaints. In Upper Swabia, for example, 54 demands were formulated, bringing together 550 complaints (Blickle, 1979). The connections between the Twelve Articles and the 54 grievances are telling. 90% of complaints concerned serfdom, 81% economic rights such as the right to hunt, fish and use the forest, 83% the manorial system, and 67% of complaints took issue with the judicial system (Schulze, 1987; Blickle, 1979). Demands do not add up because each complaint comprises several demands.

In sum, the German Peasants' Revolt did not erupt suddenly in 1524 but emerged over decades of popular contention, eventually culminating in the mass mobilization of 1524 and 1525 which covered most parts of Southern Germany, Northern France and Switzerland (Schulze, 1987).

Materials

I develop my argument using authoritative primary and secondary sources. The primary evidence comprises official correspondence, reports, and legal and diplomatic documents that historians have compiled to provide a representative overview of the German Peasants' Revolt (Scott & Scribner, 1991). Fortunately, I can therefore rely on both official documents and the utterances of participants who expressed their views in political programs or pamphlets (Ibid., 1991). Records of correspondence between different peasant armies provide insights into the organizational tactics of the peasant uprisings. Interrogation records reveal the attitudes and motivations of ordinary peasants. I complement this primary source analysis with secondary literature.

Outline

To reiterate, Charles Tilly argues that social movements are distinct from their premodern counterparts in so far as they make use of a new repertoire of contentious politics which is modular rather than segmented, cosmopolitan rather than parochial,

and autonomous rather than particular (Tilly, 1978, 1979, 1982, 1983, 1997, 2004a, b). They also display WUNC, an acronym for worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment, and involve sustained claim-making to authority (Tilly, 1994). Importantly, Tilly does not assume that some of these elements were absent in premodern social movements, but that the synthesis of these elements differentiates the modern from the premodern social movement. Tilly writes: "No single element, but the *combination* of repertoire and WUNC displays within campaigns, created the social movement's distinctiveness" (Tilly, 2004a:5). To do justice to Tilly's writings, I will therefore assess whether the German peasant uprising fulfils each of the criteria that together make the 'modern' social movement. First, I will review the repertoire of the peasant movement before investigating whether the German Peasants' Revolt was indeed cosmopolitan, autonomous and modular and analyze whether the German Peasants' Revolt can be considered a sustained challenge to authority. I will then analyze each aspect of WUNC in the context of the German Peasants' Revolt.

Repertoires of contention

The repertoire of peasant contention – the range of actions and tactics used to make demands to authority – resembled that of modern social movements during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although city councils did function as patrons who handed petitions and written requests to lordships, peasants also established direct contact between rebellious groups and the target audience (Scott and Scribner, 1991. Even the idea of the communal assembly was not unfamiliar to the revolting peasants. They would ask for a communal assembly to which they could put their case and then let that assembly vote on whether to support or reject a particular demand (ibid). Assemblies and meetings further served the purpose of deliberating tactics of "how [they] should act" (Franz, 1963:143–148).

Meetings among peasants often turned into strategic deliberations about violent versus non-violent protests or about the role of boycotts in achieving political goals. For example, peasants asked the town of Villingen to join a boycott, which would involve "a total breaking off of economic and personal intercourse with the possessors of castles, monasteries and chapters" (Stayer, 1994:54). These tactics have been described by historians as "foreshadowing the practices of the nineteenth-century Irish Land League or Gandhi in twentieth-century India" (ibid., 1994:51).

Broad coalitions between clergy and peasantry brought peasants and their allies together (Dumolyn & Haemers, 2005) in joint leagues or organizations like the Christian Union (Bak, 1976). Sister organizations of the Christian Union in the Black Forest and in Franconia (Lawrence, 1981) facilitated organizational capacity across regions. Together, these loosely coordinated organizations helped to ensure that divine law would apply to the relationships between lords and peasants (Bak, 1976).

Historical records provide evidence of the modern social movement repertoire. For example, the chronicles of Heinrich Hug, who served as the Villingen Town Councillor at the beginning of the rebellion in the Black Forest, elaborate on how these repertoires of contentious politics took political authorities by surprise and compelled them to respond:

> The peasants rallied the more each day, and would perform no labour services for their lords or give heriots any more. […] Since the peasants would not abandon their enterprise, a meeting was arranged at Schaffhausen between both parties. […] The peasants were asked at the meeting to surrender their banner to the count and kneel before him and confess that they had been in the wrong. This they blankly refused to do, and each day they marched around, kept watch, and held ready their vanguard; no one knew how to help or console them, and they were seething with rage... (Franz, 1963:89–96).

The excerpt brings together key elements of allegedly modern repertoires of contention. The daily gatherings of peasants which involved a collective refusal to perform labor services reveal organized, non-violent resistance akin to contemporary strike action. It purposefully challenged the economic foundation of the feudal economy by seeking to force authorities into concessions. Importantly, the actions took visible forms as peasants "marched around, kept watch and held ready their vanguard". Although the quote does not specify the locations of these marches, the very act of marching collectively denotes the strategic usage of public demonstration for displaying solidarity and intimidating rulers. The negotiations at Schaffhausen that accompanied the marches bring to light the direct contact between peasants and authorities to negotiate concessions. The outright refusal to surrender their banner or submit through kneeling reflects peasant empowerment by undermining the symbolisms of existing power arrangements.

Banners themselves are not a repertoire of contention, but they became objects of contention once they were banned by public authorities. For example, the administrators Johann Hübner and William Adolf pleaded guilty to putting up a banner, carrying the flag, and raising it in front of a hospital. However, the repression only promoted the flag as a symbol of resistance around which peasants continued to mobilize by putting up "a banner painted as described and said they wanted to start a riot, to which the leader of the peasants replied that they should march straight into the town with the flag and that they did, and let it fly before the town" (AGBM, 1942:627–628).

Pamphlets and other writings (Laube, 1987) provided means of communication commonly associated with the repertoire of the modern social movement. Revolutionary writings were distributed in pamphlets and other forms of print, such as the Reformatio Sigismundi or the Oberrheinische Revolutionär (Schulze, 1987). Of course, low literacy levels rendered written expressions of discontent less critical than in societies with higher literacy rates. Nevertheless, the frequent use of pamphlets, writings, and banners facilitated public declarations through which peasants "had their grievances read out and heard" (Franz, 1963:89–96).

Modular, cosmopolitan, autonomous

Tilly (1995) argues that social movement repertoires can be categorised as either modular, cosmopolitan or autonomous. In this section, I assess whether the German Peasants' Revolt meets each criterion (see also Tarrow, 2011 for a succinct description).

Modular

Social movements are modular when their repertoires are "easily transferable from one setting or circumstance to another instead of being shaped tightly to particular uses" (Tilly, 1995:46). Modular repertoires are not connected to specific targets or grievances but have a common behavioral foundation on which social movements can build (ibid.). During the German Peasants' Revolt, mass gatherings, the refusal to pay tithes, and petitions qualified as modular movement tactics. The refusal to pay tithes bore a resemblance to modern strikes, which Tilly described as an element of the modern repertoire of contention (see Fig. 1). By formulating demands and submitting grievances to authorities through the unifying political program of the Twelve Articles, peasant activists also engaged in petitioning (Waring, 1987). Although local demands varied, peasants were united in their rejection of serfdom and ubiquitously understood gatherings, strikes and petitions as means of communicating discontent.

Cosmopolitan

The repertoire of the modern social movement can further be characterized as "cosmopolitan" because it "spanned many localities or affected centers of power whose actions touched many localities" (Tilly, 1995:46). Indeed, during the German Peasants' Revolt, many demonstrations happened spontaneously in today's Germany, Switzerland, France and Belgium (Schulze, 1987). The fast spread and wide geographical reach of the movement took many lords by surprise (Sea, 2008; Lawrence, 1981) and resembled peasant revolts in the Ottoman Empire during the seventeenth century when the movement spread through well-connected villages (Barkey & Rossem, 1997). The German peasants, too, sent out messages to villages in the countryside, motivating others to join. The rapid growth of peasant mobilization was described as "wildfire" (Lawrence, 1981:247) with "epidemic character" (ibid.:81), metaphors akin to strikes as 'forest fires' in Chicago and Paris during the late nineteenth century (Biggs, 2005), 'snowball effects' in the mobilization of British workers in 1989–1990 (Hobsbawm, 1985), 'prairie fire' of the coalmine strikes in Germany in 1889 (Moore, 1978), or strike 'epidemics' in France in May 1880 and May 1890 (Perrot, 1984). Figure 2 shows the geographical reach of the German Peasants' Revolt ranging from regions in Northern Germany to what forms part of today's Italy. By referring to their region of influence as *landscapes* (German: Landschaften), organizations like the Christian Union stressed the movement's expansion.

Autonomous

Modern social movements are "autonomous" because they begin "on the claimants' own initiative and establish[…] direct communication between claimants and nationally significant centers of power" (Tilly, 1995:46). Although peasants autonomously organized to air their grievances, their efforts were often bolstered by the support of literate and influential allies like clerics or nobility who targeted political centers

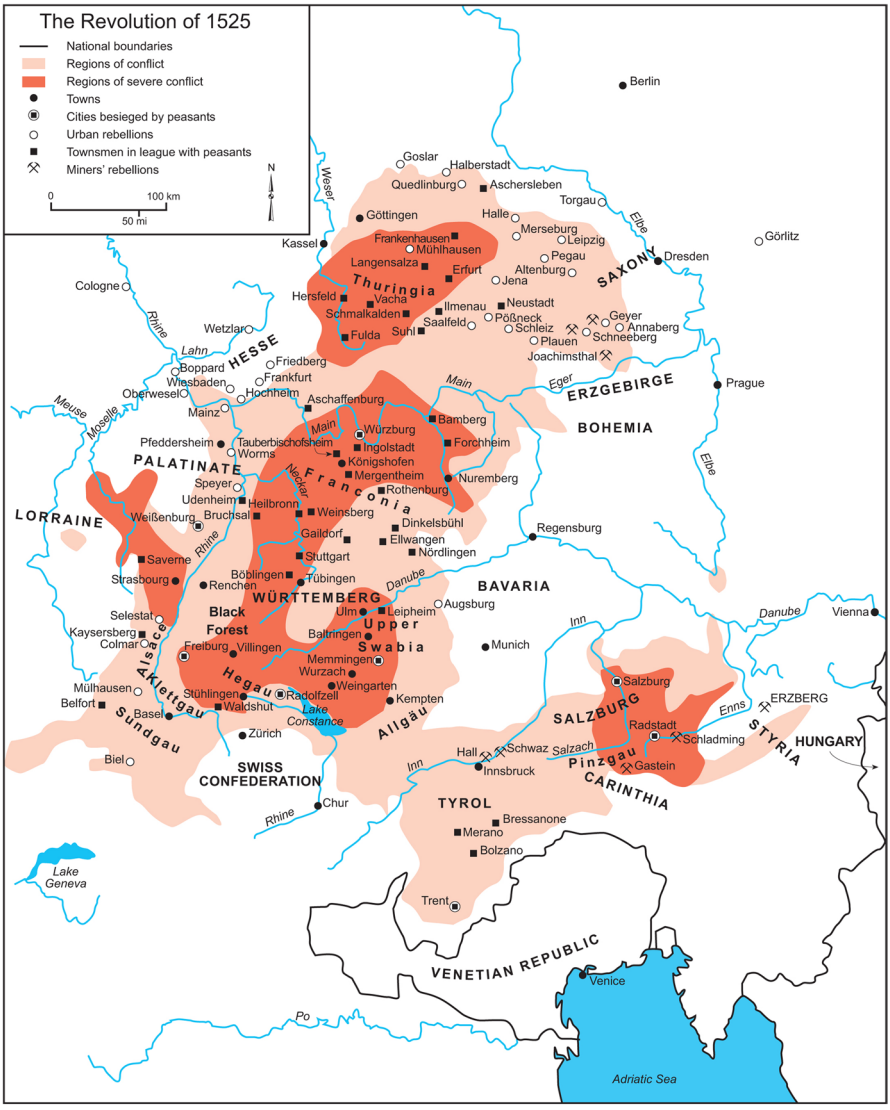

Fig. 2 Dispersion of the German Peasants' Revolt of 1525 (Blickle, 1981:Map 1)

of power on peasants' behalf. Nevertheless, peasant activists themselves made direct claims to feudal lords who constituted the relevant political power of the time. They either appointed local peasant leaders to negotiate on their behalf in assemblies, town halls, and peasant parliaments (Scott & Scribner, 1991) or they addressed the lords directly. For example, the peasant women from Heilbronn directly targeted the lords when they proclaimed a reversal of the current social and political order: "You are no longer lords, but peasants, and we 120 are now the lords of Hohenlohe" (Cohn, 1993:545–557). Quests for agency and an end to serfdom further reveal ideological

independence and autonomy. By declaring themselves “born free”, peasants were not just seeking relief from immediate grievances but asserted a fundamental right to self-governance for which they needed to “be released from serfdom”. In a similar spirit, the Twelve Articles advocated for collective self-determination and village autonomy that fueled a "peasant political consciousness" and supplied the lifeblood of the peasant rebellion" (Scott & Scribner, 1991:14).

Sustained claim-making

Tilly understands modern social movements to be sustained campaigns rather than episodic moments of uprising against authority (Tilly, 1982). Does the Peasant Revolt of 1524 and 1525 meet this criterion? Although the uprising itself happened in the course of only two years, historians agree that the Peasant Revolt grew out of the Bundschuh movement (Schulze, 1987), a sustained anti-clerical movement that emerged in 1493 and became the symbol of resistance to the feudal order. Documentation of peasants assembling to resist a new tax of the Schwäbischer Bund dates back as far as 1493. Historical documentation further shows that peasants disavowed the feudal economy in 1511, 1512, and 1514 (Schulze, 1987). Rather than resisting specific taxation policies, these peasant insurrections were characterized by a fundamental rejection of serfdom (Schulze, 1987). As a result, concessions such as the ones granted in the Tübinger Vertrag of 1514, did not fulfil many of the peasants’ demands and were unable to erase the grievances that became pivotal for the great uprising of 1524 and 1525 (Pohl-Zucher, 2017). Nevertheless, clearly recognizable movement organizations like the Christian Union and their local chapters only existed for the duration of the Revolt, despite the intention to create an organization with “a permanent existence of its own” (Lawrence, 1981:146).

Continuity in leaders lends further support to the interpretation of the German Peasants’ Revolt as sustained. An illustrative example is Joß Fritz, a prominent figure in the Peasant Revolt who is known for orchestrating Bundschuh uprisings in the years 1502, 1512, and 1517 (Schulze, 1987). Importantly, references to Joß Fritz appear even in documents from 1524 and 1525, suggesting that his leadership and dedication left a legacy that exceeded his active years.

Although the German Peasants’ Revolt cumulated in two years of intense uprising, it had continuously mobilised around common themes, identities, and leaders for many years. Just as the months-long George Floyd uprising in 2020 built on Black Lives Matter protests since 2012, the German Peasants’ Revolt emerged out of sustained movement mobilisation.

WUNC

Modern social movements combine a particular movement repertoire that is part of sustained claim-making with the display of WUNC, which stands for the public representation of worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment (Tilly, 1994). The

relevance of WUNC lies in the idea of a democratic polity as a movement audience. The German Peasants' Revolt found its institutional and popular base in *communities* (German: Gemeinden) and their assemblies (Blickle, 1979) where peasants sought to present themselves as worthy, united, numerous and committed.

Worthiness

Social movements may choose to "behave decently to attract larger audiences and realize a continued presence on the public scene" (Wouters & Walgrave, 2017:5). The German Peasants' Revolt achieved such worthiness in several ways. By anchoring their claims in religious justice, peasants avoided outright rejection of their demands (Scott & Scribner, 1991). When peasants justified their cause with respect to religious justice, they were often granted at least rhetorical concessions. To give just one example of an exchange between peasants and lords:

> It has been the custom that a poor man did not have the right to catch or shoot game, likewise fish in running water [...] We regard this as quite unjust and not in accordance with the Word of God, for when the Lord God created man he gave him power over the fish in the water, the birds in the air, and all the animals on the earth [...] (Baumann, 1877:120–26).

In their response, the lords did not question the moral worthiness of such demands but expressed concerns about the practical consequences for the public good:

> My Lords will gladly concede that, as far as the council's forest and its authority extends and no further, its subjects shall and may catch and shoot any game and fowl on their holdings as they require, but […] when the subjects pursue and want to catch or shoot game they should take care that they do harm to no one else's property […] so that […] no great harm befalls the common man thereby (ibid.).

Peasants further displayed worthiness by distinguishing themselves from criminals. Just like British food rioters in the eighteenth century did not steal but wasted grain to demonstrate worthiness (Thompson, 1971; Thwaites, 1996), German peasants behaved with decency stating that "they wished not to harm anyone" and paid for whatever they ate and drank […] to help them gain justice" (Franz, 1963:89–96). On other occasions, peasants even used what might be interpreted as a repertoire of non-violent resistance (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). For example, the leader of the rebellion in Upper Swabia made clear when he addressed the lords, the nobility, and the Swabian League that the peasant assembly "has no intention of causing a disturbance or using force, of which we have little. We bear arms and armour not in order to use them, but only to preserve our lives ... should our assembly be regarded as evil and should anyone wish to strike us down defenceless ... this present assembly has no other complaint than that they are aggrieved beyond measure by you" (Franz, 1963:143–148). Although the German Peasants' Revolt is remembered as an uprising that involved mass violence, it made strategic use of non-violence to enhance its worthiness.

As a result of its worthiness, the movement gained support from respectable societal groups not typically associated with social unrest or peasant rebellions. For example, remarkable women like Margaret Rennerin emerged as advocates of the peasants' cause, calling peasants to "march boldly" (Von Rauch, 1936:198). Similarly, we know that 60 women gathered to inspire both men and women to join their cause. Women's participation signified a broader societal discontent that transcended gender and class divides. Furthermore, the alliance with artisans and influential noblemen like Florian Geyer who publicly declared: "that every Prince should have [...the rebellion] at his door" (Fries, 1883:119) solidified the movement's worthiness and amplified its public appeal.

Unity

Unity occurs "in the heads of the protesters". Social movement activists typically evoke their unity visually and behaviorally. They

> wear or show common symbols or uniforms, dress in a single color or wear matching badges, they march in ranks, link arms, perform a coordinated choreography and chant similar slogans. The performance broadcasts the message that the group is a homogeneous bloc capable of acting in unison (Wouters & Walgrave, 2017:6).

The German Peasants' Revolt achieved such unity through the display of widely understood symbols and banners. For example, peasants rallied behind a cross-regionally recognized banner in the colors of white and red (Schulze, 1987), and flags displaying a 'Bundschuh' (see Fig. 3). The Bundschuh is a typical leather shoe worn by peasants. It served as a unifying symbol in peasants' collective struggle by symbolically differentiating peasants from the lords and feudal elites, whose footwear differed starkly from those worn by the peasants (Rublack, 2013).

Despite the enormous geographical reach, peasants were united across regions in their claims and methods of contention. In fact, were the German Peasants' Revolt not united through common symbols, it would be difficult to explain the simultaneous occurrence of events and the unified peasant identity across localities (Lawrence, 1981).

Numbers

Protest works through numbers. The more people participate in social movements, the stronger the signal to policymakers, or the greater the influence on audiences to whom politicians feel accountable (Lohmann, 1993). Whereas in modern democratic states, public opinion polls provide political leaders with information to detect public sentiment, numbers were even more critical for peasants to reveal their otherwise concealed grievances. Indeed, peasants understood numbers as both disruptive and strategically sensitive: "[W]e are so many, and if we came before our lords in these numbers, they would [...] not receive us in the spirit we intend. So we should consider how we should act" (Franz, 1963:143–148). Historians estimate the number of individuals who mobilized during the uprising of 1524 and 1525 at 300,000 (Bak, 1976; Scott & Scribner, 1991). Their mobilization in defiance of dire repression eventually resulted in war-like casualties (Roper, 2021), which brought to light the enormous commitment of peasant activists.

Fig. 3 Peasant Bearing a Shield with a Bundschuh (Scribner, 1975:35)

Commitment

Commitment reflects individuals' dedication to the movement's cause, often tested in environments of adversity and repression. Thus, "braving risks of police repression is a common commitment display" (Johnston, 2014:98). During the German Peasants' Revolt, this commitment became manifest through peasants' participation

in social unrest at significant risk to their lives. Most violently, princes and nobility responded to peasant uprisings by deploying mercenary armies, which were responsible for full-fledged massacres (Zimmerman, 1982:1216). Beyond these direct attacks on peasants' physical livelihood, entire communities were held hostage for supporting the revolting peasants through fines or the confiscation of land and property. Despite these costs, peasants' commitment to the movement fueled ongoing mobilization which eventually escalated into mass violence, including the peasant-led Weinsberg Massacre in April 1525 which caused brutal retribution (Oman, 1890). The belligerent turns of the Peasant Revolt continue to characterize the collective memory of the Peasant Revolt to this day. While repression and war cloud our sight on the Peasant Revolt as a social movement, they also stress the enormous commitment of peasant activists.

Theoretical implications

What I hope to have demonstrated by means of an historical example is not merely that social movements existed well before the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but that the standard conceptualization of social movements as products of modernity is flawed. In the following section I highlight two conceptual flaws that give us good reason to revisit our understanding of social movements.

The circularity charge

By showing that the premodern German Peasants' Revolt qualifies as a social movement even before capitalism, democracy, and the nation-state exerted their full influence on contentious politics, this analysis calls into question the assumption that these forces are therefore necessary prerequisites for people to make their voices heard in a modern movement-like fashion. By anchoring the definition of social movements in this narrative of modernity, we seem to have lost sight of other historical contexts in which social movements can emerge. Indeed, my analysis suggests that structural conditions from a different time period can give way to similar grievances and thus broadly comparable patterns of behavior, echoing the following observation by Friedrich Engels (1926:9): "In the same way as the capitalist is opposed to the industrial worker, the large landowner or large tenant is opposed to the wage-workers of the land. […] The industrial workers can free themselves only by turning the capital of the bourgeoisie […] into social property, their own property […]. Similarly, the wage-workers of the land can be freed from their hideous misery only when the main object of their work, the land itself, will be withdrawn from the private property of the large peasants and still larger feudal masters, and transformed into social property to be cultivated by an association of land workers on common basis."

Analytically, the risk is to a priori accept the statement that 'old' feudal structure causes 'old' movements, whereas 'modern' capitalism produces 'modern'

movements. By pinning the historical origins of social movements in this way to a particular social structure we face the danger of circular reasoning – reasoning that has led to premature assumptions about the historical starting point of social movements during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This risk is aggravated by the fact that competing for the Holy Grail of the historical origins is no level playing field because the available evidence shrinks the further we go back in time (Hilton, 1973). Needless to say, lack of evidence is no proof of the absence of social movements in periods that are less easily accessible.

Conceptual stretch

By using the example of the German Peasants' Revolt to illustrate that the concept of social movements is broad enough to encompass social movements from different periods, we not only challenge the assumption of social movements as markers of modernity, but also question conceptualizations so elusive that they gloss over important differences across social movements. Indeed, my description of the German Peasants' Revolt – while within the confines of Charles Tilly's framework – should not be taken as evidence that social movements are all the same, or that social movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did not have qualitatively different characteristics from their predecessors (Berger & Nehring, 2017). Rather, the problem is that qualitative differences are not accounted for. For example, the degree of organization through leadership and rules that characterized Chartism or the Anti-Corn Law League, arguably went beyond the organizational capacity of the Christian Union, joint leagues and devices such as the Memmingen Articles during the Revolt of 1524 and 1525 (see van der Linden, 2017 on organization as a distinguishing element). Similarly, workers unions and political parties could draw on "large parts of the population in industrial work" (Calhoun, 2012:159; Calhoun, 1982) thereby facilitating far-reaching coordination that lent the labor movement its historic significance (Berger, 2000, 2017); overall coordination that earlier movements like the Swing Riots in rural England were lacking (Jones, 2009), and medieval and early modern peasant revolts could achieve by means of emotional diffusion (Roper, 2021).

'Circularity' and 'conceptual stretch' are severe criticisms. It is therefore particularly important that the analysis does not challenge a straw man argument rather than the argument of the man himself. First, Charles Tilly could have objected that his claims pertained to broad historical patterns that do not preclude exceptions to the rule. The danger is that by disarming potential challenges as exceptions to broader patterns, historical claims become immune to falsification. This is further complicated by drawing a meaningful distinction between 'pattern' and 'outlier.' Historical outliers warrant close examination, as they can direct our attention to potential continuities previously overshadowed by narratives about the distinctiveness of particular historical periods. Second, the German Peasants' Revolt could be read as a precursor to social movements resulting from emerging capitalism. In this vein, the analysis would not have falsified capitalism as a 'mobilizing structure,' but merely highlighted that structural change towards capitalism mattered for mobilization earlier than previously assumed. This objection does not extend to democracy and the

nation-state, and it risks undermining the core of Tilly's argument about how social movements formed in response to the peculiarities of modern capitalism like the rapid rise of wage laborers in the cities and the decoupling of workers from specific pieces of land.

Towards reconceptualizing social movements

Dealing with the problem of conceptual stretch and the circularity charge simultaneously confronts us with the challenge that whenever we try to overcome the issue of conceptual stretch by tying the definition of social movements to a particular narrative about their origins, we risk reinforcing the logic that compelled Tilly and his followers to define modern social movements by their presupposed modernity. Conversely, broadening the scope to avoid this problem risks glossing over important historical differences.

To solve both problems in Tilly's model, it may be fruitful to conceptualize social movements inductively through overlapping similarities at various levels of abstraction instead of focusing on one defining feature. At an abstract level, such "family resemblance" (Wittgenstein, 1953) may be found at the level of overlapping behavioral categories such as collective identity, mobilization types, or the pursuit of common goals. In crucial departure from definitions anchored in an ontological presupposition about social movements as essentially modern phenomena, the definition would avoid circular reasoning in historical explanations by allowing scholars to look for similarities across popular uprisings. Social movements thus understood allow us to analyze how their different elements are present to varying extents under distinct historical conditions.

Conceptualizing social movements in such broad terms only deals with the circularity charge inherent to modernist understandings of social movements, but it does not overcome – and may indeed exacerbate – the issue of conceptual stretch. Specifically, it may prevent us from addressing historically specific aspects of social movements, such as the militarized nature of the German Peasants' Revolt. Fortuitously, family resemblances exist at various levels of specificity, so that scholars can define the movement family depending on the intended scope of their explanatory model. Freely borrowing from Michael Mann (1986:xxii), who argued that "the causes of the development of one power source [here we shall insert social movements] mostly lie within its own antecedent condition," we are well-advised to design definitions of, say, the labor movement specific enough to render industrial work a plausible antecedent condition. The point is to remarry a definition of social movements with the explanation for their emergence without invoking circular reasoning. Social movements thus conceptualized would bring an array of momentous historic events like the great rebellions during the Mughal Empire (Alam, 1986), the Japanese Peasants' Revolts (White, 1995) and even anti-colonial liberation movements (Fanon, 1961) into the purview of scholarship on the origins of social movements. By offering conceptually adaptive definitions of social movements, we may also overcome prevailing terminological uncertainties among medievalists who variably define their object of study as 'peasant movements' (Hilton, 1973), 'popular movements' (Cohn, 2012), or indeed 'social movements' (Hilton, 1973).

Conclusion

In this article I challenged the orthodoxy that social movements are key markers of modernity that originated in response to capitalism, democracy, and the nation-state during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By means of primary sources and historical scholarship, I demonstrated that the German Peasants' Revolt of 1524 and 1525 meets the core criteria of social movements as they were conceptualized by Charles Tilly: the Revolt used a modular, cosmopolitan, and – to some extent – autonomous repertoire of contention. The Revolt was also sustained and displayed WUNC – worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment. The analysis thus falsifies the dominant theoretical model on the origins of social movements. Rather than reading the article as a call to push the historical 'origins' of social movements further back in time, it should encourage us to rethink the very concept of social movements. As a first step in this direction, I sketched an argument for conceptualizing social movements in terms of family resemblances at different levels of specificity that may help to overcome weaknesses of Tilly's conceptionalization.

Loosening modernity's tight grip on social movements may appear like a heretical break with current sociological orthodoxy, but it follows in the footsteps of historical scholarship that has challenged the binary distinction between 'modern' and 'premodern' by suggesting that the insurrections of the Middle Ages did not just fit criteria of modern social movements but proved arguably more 'modern' than contemporary social movements (Cohn, 2012; see also Hilton, 1973). The analysis also seamlessly follows from earlier debates on how the individualism and identity that characterized the 'new' feminist, ecology, peace, or gay movements set these movements apart from the 'old' class-based movements of the nineteenth century (Melucci, 1980, 1981). At the time, however, followers of Tilly's thesis about the origins of social movements did not see the need to re-conceptualize social movements arguing that many distinguishing characteristics of the so-called 'New Social Movements' fit "very well the many movements that flourished in the late eighteenth and especially early nineteenth centuries" (Calhoun, 1993:386).

Ironically, my objection to Charles Tilly and those scholars who argue that modern social movements originated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries resembles their own arguments against proponents of conceptual secessionism in the 1970s. My analysis thus concurs with Craig Calhoun who argued that "we are better prepared to analyze all social movements if we pay attention to the inherent plurality of their forms, contents, social bases, and meaning to participants and do not attempt to grasp them in terms of a single model defined by labor or revolutionary movements [...]" (ibid., 1993:386). His article calls to abandon "both the developmentalism that treats early nineteenth-century movements as either precursors to the later consolidation of labor and socialism or else as historical sidetracks, and the opposite refusal to look for macro historical pattern [...]" (ibid., 1993:387). I arrive at the same conclusion concerning the orthodox view that movements originated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

It is the task of future interdisciplinary research programs in sociology and history to analyze the differences and similarities of social movements across time, thereby illuminating the socio-political processes that explain how and when social movements occur (Berger & Nehring, 2017; van der Linden, 2017). This year marks the quincentennial anniversary of the outbreak of the German Peasants' Revolt – what better way to honor a social movement than by letting it challenge the foundations of our discipline?

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