

What's Happening after "New Social Movements"?

Some Findings from Indigenous-led Autonomous Space Making in Canada

Half a century has already passed since the 1970s, when the "new social movements (NSM)" theory emerged with the diagnosis that "postindustrial" time was coming. While NSM theory has been elaborated thereafter, studies on subsequent social movements which have different character from NSM have been mostly case analyses without renewal of conceptual tools. I find this conceptual vacuum requiring theoretical work on a dimension different from middle-range theories for case analysis. How can we update the conceptualization of social movements, along with diagnoses of contemporary global society which has been experiencing drastic changes such as neoliberal marketization and climate change?

This paper poses such open question and attempts to conceptualize new forms of contemporary social movement based on my case study of autonomous space making led by Indigenous Wet'suwet'en people in Canada. Particularly since the 1990s, there has been an upsurge in direct actions to reject land extraction without consent and to recreate Indigenous living space, rather than seeking recognition of Aboriginal rights from the settler colonial state. Observation of this kind of movements leads us to be conscious of two biases in sociological arguments on social movements. One is formal reformist bias, which means that many of the arguments start from the assumption that movements exist for formal change like legal or institutional reform, underestimating informal change that they can provoke (change in social space, relations, consciousness and cultural representation, to name a few). The other is recognitionist bias, which indicates the tendency to see movements centering on difference (such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality) as seeking cultural recognition, which is not always the case. Putting aside these state-oriented biases allows us to find different forms and potentials of ongoing social movements that have been struggling to counter neoliberal extractivist norms in today's world.