

DIAWI + McADAM, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

+ NETWORKS (2003)

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Contentious Connections in Great Britain, 1828–34

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When eighteenth century British activists started inventing the social movement, they had little idea what a peculiar and influential political form they were fabricating. They fashioned a new sort of campaign: the sustained challenge to authorities on behalf of a relatively well defined program in the name of an aggrieved population by means of coordinated public performances displaying the worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment of the program's supporters. As they took shape in Great Britain, social movements regularly came to include associational founding and recruitment, public meetings, processions, demonstrations, petition drives, and statements to the press. Although it took half a century for this configuration of activities to become standard politics, and longer than that for it to acquire the name social movement, the configuration's emergence marked a new stage in British popular politics.

The social movement certainly had peculiar properties for its time. It emerged in a day when popular politics divided mainly between direct action, on one side, and appeals to patrons, on the other. Britain's violent, often vindictive eighteenth century forms of direct action included rough music, donkeying, window breaking, pulling down of dishonoured houses, and seizure of high-priced or sequestered grain. They also had positive counterparts such as parading heroes in chairs or placing candles in windows for public celebrations. Although the direct petition to King or parliament had some standing as an appeal to patrons by middle-class Britons, ordinary people more often asked local notables to bring their troubles to the authorities' attention.

In this context, it was peculiar for people to start making claims by the means we now recognize as belonging to social movements: forming special-interest associations, holding public meetings, organizing petition drives, marching, lobbying, making statements for public consumption, and so on. These new means abandoned both direct action and appeals to local patrons, despite the fact that other of the old strategies often continued to produce results in the short run. The new means, in contrast, had no prospect of realizing people's claims in one or two

iterations. They only worked—if they did!—over the long run and after repeated efforts. They often neutralized themselves, furthermore, by provoking counter-movements on the part of opponents.

Yet social movement strategies turned out to have wide appeal. The new bundle of political forms, the social movement, centred on campaigns in support of or opposition to publicly articulated programmes by means of associations, meetings, demonstrations, petitions, electoral participation, strikes, and related means of coordinated action. It provided an opportunity to offer a sustained challenge to powerful figures and institutions without necessarily attacking them physically, but also without kowtowing to them. It said, in effect, 'We are here, we support this cause, there are lots of us, we know how to act together, and we could cause trouble if we wanted to.' It asserted the consequential presence of new political actors and/or political programmes.

Why, how, with what correlates and consequences did social movements become so prevalent in Great Britain and elsewhere? This paper takes up only one causal strand in that complex fabric of cause and effect. It concentrates on the interdependence of (a) widening adoption of social-movement forms and (b) increasing centrality of parliament (more precisely, the House of Commons, and by extension parliamentary elections) to Britain's popular politics. The overall argument on which the paper builds runs as follows:

1. Britain's enormous increase of military expenditure from the Seven Years War (1756–63) onward significantly enhanced tax-authorizing parliament's leverage in national politics.
2. Parliament used its enhanced powers by acting more decisively and effectively on matters that directly affected the welfare of ordinary people, even in the face of royal and noble opposition.
3. The crown and royal patronage became less central to most forms of national politics, especially those directly involving popular interests.
4. Despite a narrow parliamentary electorate, as a consequence, parliamentary debates, legislation, and election both more frequently took up issues of concern to ordinary people and incited popular responses.
5. Because propertied males affiliated with the state church wielded disproportionate weight in parliament and in national politics at large, people outside that small category more often faced threats than benefits to their interests from governmental action.
6. Yet some members of parliament sought popular support as a counterweight to factions based on landed wealth, and therefore made alliances (intermittent or long term) with popular political leaders.
7. Organized popular forces therefore discovered that they could gain political weight through a combination of (a) displaying support for advocates of their interests and (b) threatening to disrupt the routines of elite politics.

8. Populist political entrepreneurs experimented incessantly, probing the existing political system for soft spots, adapting established forms of claim-making to new participants, occasions, or issues, and devising new tactics as opportunities presented themselves.
9. Repeated interactions among popular claimants, objects of claims, authorities, and parliament (especially the House of Commons) established the social movement as a standard way of making sustained claims at a national scale in Great Britain.
10. Although the process was well under way by 1828, the major national campaigns of 1828–34—notably the vast mobilization that preceded and produced 1832's Reform Act—consolidated both social movement politics and the position of the Commons at the centre of popular claim making.

Schematically, the argument says that parliamentarization and the expansion of social movement politics reinforced each other. Earlier work (Tilly 1995*a–d*, 1997) has made the general case for such a line of argument. This paper amplifies earlier analyses by looking more closely at changes in the forms, participants, and objects of popular claim making during the seven turbulent years from 1828 to 1834. It adds a comparison of three significantly different political regions to previously documented national trends. Building on the recognition that claims of X on Y or vice versa establish relations among political actors and among categories of political actors, it uses formal network analyses to document its major empirical claims. After a summary sketch of social movement activity in Great Britain from the 1780s into the 1830s, it proceeds to a closer examination of 1828–34.

THE RISE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN GREAT BRITAIN, 1787–1834

Although we could trace elements of social movement activism back to the libertarian campaigns of John Wilkes in the 1760s and the anti-Catholic campaign of George Gordon in the 1780s, crystallization of Britain's social movement repertoire greatly accelerated with national campaigns against the slave trade, then against slavery itself. In collaboration with activists in other Western countries, British antislavery movement organizers played a major part in abolishing both slave trading and slavery itself through most of the Atlantic world. Heroic activists sometimes campaigned publicly against slavery in major regions of slave-based production, including the British colonies. Crucial campaigns, however, first took place mostly where slaves were rare but beneficiaries of their production were prominent. For the most part, antislavery support arose in populations that benefited no more than indirectly from slave production.

The British version of the social movement's story begins in 1787. British Quakers, Methodists, and other antiestablishment Protestants joined with more secular advocates of working class freedoms to oppose all forms of coerced

labour. A Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, organized in 1787, coordinated a vast national campaign, an early social movement.

At first glance, the central role of Manchester, Lancashire, the industrial revolution's first great metropolis, in that campaign looks strange. Textile production in Manchester depended heavily on cotton produced by slaves in the Americas. But in Manchester, both masters and workers trumpeted the superiority of freedom over slave labour, despite disagreeing bitterly over what sorts of freedoms workers should actually enjoy.¹ In 1788, Manchester's citizens sent to parliament a petition against the slave trade endorsed by a reported 10,639 citizens, about two-thirds of its adult male population. Even at the risk of paying more for cotton produced by free labour, they agitated for the end of slavery. During the winter of 1787–8 abolitionists organized multiple public meetings in the city, typically leaving a copy of the petition in place for signature or endorsement with an X after the meeting.

Manchester's initiative set the city against the leaders of Liverpool, the main port through which slave-produced cotton entered England. In the name of economic progress and property rights, Liverpool's leaders objected to the antislavery activism. Manchester's example, however, had the wider resonance in Great Britain. Perhaps 100 thousand people throughout Britain put their names to abolitionist petitions in 1787–8. At the same time, other associations, public meetings, and petition drives were agitating for parliamentary reform as well as for repeal of restrictions on political rights of Catholics and of Protestant Dissenters (non-members of the state-backed Anglican Church such as Baptists and Methodists).

During the next two decades, British activists rounded out the social movement repertoire with two crucial additions: the lobby and the demonstration. Lobbying began literally as talking to Members of parliament in the lobby of the parliament building on their way to or from sessions. Later the word generalized to mean any direct intervention with legislators to influence their votes. British activists also created the two forms of the demonstration we still know today: the disciplined march through streets and the organized assembly in a symbolically significant public space, both accompanied by coordinated displays of support for a shared programme.

Of course all the forms of social movement activism had precedents, including elite public meetings, formal presentations of petitions, and the committees of correspondence that played so important a part in the American resistance to royal demands during the 1760s and 1770s. They drew heavily on organizational repertoires already prevalent among activist Dissenters such as the Quakers. But between the 1780s and the 1820s British activists (religious and secular) created a new synthesis. From then to the present, social movements regularly combined associations, meetings, demonstrations, petitions, electoral participation, lobbying, strikes, and related means of coordinated action.

Within Great Britain, parliament began responding to popular pressure with partial regulation of the slave trade in 1788. By 1806, abolition of the slave trade

had become a major issue in parliamentary elections. In 1807, parliament declared illegal the shipping of slaves to Britain's colonies. From that point on, British activists demanded that their government act against other slave-trading countries. Great Britain then pressed for the withdrawal of other European powers from the slave trade. At the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, the major European powers except for Spain and Portugal agreed to abolition of the trade. Under economic and diplomatic pressure from Britain, Spain and Portugal reluctantly withdrew from officially sanctioned slave trading step-by-step between 1815 and 1867. From 1867 onward, only outlaws shipped slaves across the Atlantic. With Brazil's abolition of slavery in 1888, slavery lost all legal standing in Western Europe and the Americas.

Meanwhile, the social movement form had been consolidating outside the purview of antislavery politics. During the great wars of 1792–1815 with France, not only British advocates of democratic reform but also their proregime opponents widely adopted associations, public meetings, demonstrations, electoral campaigns, pamphlets, and petitions as means of conveying their messages. Severe wartime restrictions on association and assembly slowed the pace of social movement mobilization until the postwar years, but through the wars reformers and workers continued to rail publicly against corruption and capitalist exploitation.

In the company of eighteenth century style attacks on machines, enclosures, and exploitative employers, the immediate postwar years (1816–20) brought a great surge of social movement mobilization on behalf of political reform and workers' rights to organize. Even the vastly popular campaign of support for Queen Caroline, the estranged wife of new King George IV, in 1820–1 occurred largely through meetings, processions, and demonstrations. Electoral campaigns attracted wider and wider participation in social movement style. In Ireland (from 1801 part of a fragile United Kingdom), Daniel O'Connell and his allies were organizing the mass-membership Catholic Association to break down the exclusion of Catholics from national politics and parliament. At the same time, Protestant Dissenters within Great Britain were campaigning for expansion of their own restricted political rights. Literati, political activists, and officeholders alike commonly interpreted the swelling of popular campaigns as the Rise of the Crowd. They disagreed sharply, to be sure, on whether the crowd's rise threatened liberty or promised liberation (Morgan 1988; Herzog 1998; Plotz 2000).

Several of these social movement campaigns culminated in the years from 1828 to 1834. In 1828, as a response to widespread agitation, parliament's repeal of the seventeenth century Test and Corporation Acts opened up political participation for Protestant Dissenters. In 1829, under even greater pressure from campaigns and counter-campaigns, parliament staved off threatened insurrection in Ireland by reducing restrictions on Catholic political participation—balancing that measure by narrowing the franchise in Ireland and banning the massive Catholic Association. By far the greatest social movement mobilization, however, centred on demands for parliamentary reform: widened eligibility for membership in

parliament, an expanded franchise, equalization of existing representation, and increased public accountability for parliament itself.

The Reform Act of 1832 made modest concessions in all these directions. Although historians keep debating whether, to what extent, and how popular demands promoted the passage of the Reform Act (see, e.g. Price 1999: 264–7; Archer 2000: 70–2), they generally agree that the popular participation in reform movements oriented to the Reform in 1830–2 exceeded anything Great Britain had ever seen before. At a minimum, massive popular mobilization gave parliamentary supporters of the Reform such as Thomas Babington Macaulay plausible grounds for their arguments that modest concessions would hold off revolution. They could, after all, point to the spectres of France and Belgium, where revolutionaries had installed new regimes in 1830. Radical societies, political unions, and workers' associations allied uneasily in a turbulent national campaign. Widespread involvement of organized workers in the 1830–2 campaign made the Act's virtual exclusion of workers from the vote a more salient public issue in 1832–4, when parliament often sided with the propertied on such questions as the Poor Law Amendment Act. Precisely because of the example of the Reform movement, the victory of parliament, and the expanded space of representative politics made established local assemblies crucial arenas for communication with national authorities. A great deal of contention during those later years simultaneously began in local assemblies and/or concerned the proper membership and conduct of local assemblies.

THREE REGIONS FROM 1828 TO 1834

Let us close in on a major moment in the social movement's consolidation, the seven years from 1828 to 1834. Those years cannot show us the long-term interplay between Parliamentary change and social movement development. But they allow us to witness a momentous break: mass mobilization promoted the Reform Act of 1832, which in turn altered relations between British subjects and the exercise of national power. In order not to render an already complex analysis utterly incomprehensible, the evidence to follow will employ a crude distinction between 1828–31 ('before' the Reform Act, which actually passed in June 1832) and 1832–4 ('after' the Act). The evidence comes from a more general study of contentious politics in Great Britain from 1758 to 1834.

The study as a whole catalogues 8088 'contentious gatherings' occurring (a) Southeastern England (Kent, Middlesex, Surrey, and Sussex) during 13 scattered years from 1758 to 1820 and (b) Great Britain (England, Wales, and Scotland) as a whole during the seven years from 1828 to 1834. Contentious gatherings are occasions on which a number of people (in the instance, 10 or more) outside government gathered in a publicly accessible place and made visible collective claims bearing on the interests of at least one person outside their own number. The machine-readable catalogue contains truncated, edited textual transcriptions

TABLE 7.1. *Distribution of contentious gatherings over time and space*

	Kent	Lancashire	Middlesex	Great Britain
1828–31	192	273	1166	4045
1832–4	101	187	1454	2839
Total	293	460	2620	6884

such events reported in *Gentlemen's Magazine*, *the Annual Register*, or the *London Chronicle* for 1758, 1759, 1768, 1769, 1780, and 1781; in those publications as well as the *Times* of London for 1789, 1795, 1801, 1807, 1811, 1819, and 1820; and in *Gentlemen's Magazine*, *Annual Register*, *Morning Chronicle*, *Times*, *Journal of parliament*, *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates or Votes and Proceedings of parliament* for 1828–34.²

Within that set, the present analysis deals with contentious gatherings occurring in the counties of Kent, Lancashire, and Middlesex, and sometimes in Great Britain as a whole, aggregated into the two periods 1828–31 and 1832–4 (Table 7.1).

As a rough index of mobilization and demobilization, contentious gatherings declined significantly from 48 to 34 per year in Kent, dropped slightly from 68 to 60 per year in Lancashire, rose from 292 to 485 per year in Middlesex, and diminished mildly from 1011 to 946 per year over the whole of Great Britain. The three counties displayed different patterns of mobilization and demobilization as functions of their dominant activities. Kent was a region of capitalist agriculture, Lancashire Britain's prime concentration of capitalist industry, and Middlesex the densest part of London and environs.³ The three counties by no means exhaust the variety of Great Britain in the 1830s, but they offer an opportunity to see whether parliamentarization and social movement expansion operated differently in agrarian, industrial, and urban environments.

Evidence to come indicates that after the massive parliament-centred mobilizations of 1828–31, agrarian Kent subsided not only into lower levels of public contention but also into more parochial forms of claim making. To the extent that social movement politics existed in Kent after the Reform, it split between popular efforts to open up local power structures and elite appeals to national authorities. Although workers continued to figure more prominently in popular contention in Lancashire than elsewhere, both Lancashire and Middlesex moved more definitively than Kent toward a system of public claim making strongly centred on parliament. That claim making increasingly took social movement forms.

Our machine-readable descriptions of contentious gatherings include separate records for (1) whole events, (2) sources consulted, (3) each distinct individual named in our accounts, (4) each separate location involved, (5) participating formations (any person or set of persons the sources describe as acting distinctly