

**Nov. 3**

1. Social Change
2. **Collective behavior**
3. Social movements

# Collective Behavior

# Collective behavior

## Spartacus (1960)



# Collective behavior

## Collective action

- ∴ Group of people acting “as one”
- ∴ Often the focus is on *unexpected* action
- ∴ Informal, non-institutional coordination

## What makes this kind of behavior notable?

- ∴ Unexpected outcome
- ∴ Acts in opposition to existing power structures
- ∴ Only works because enough people participate





# Collective behavior

## Why is collective action difficult?



### Tragedy of the commons

- ∴ Shared pasture needed by all
- ∴ “Default” state: overgrazing
- ∴ Best outcome equal and controlled allocation
- ∴ No single herder would do better by limiting behavior
- ∴ Only solution is cooperation
  - Community norms
  - Government oversight
  - Punishment for misuse

### Describes pervasive features of collective action

- ∴ Collective good at odds with individual good
- ∴ All or nothing: if not enough people participate situation is same (or worse)
  - Risk of acting alone
- ∴ Solutions require communication, community, and unified behavior

# Theories of collective behavior

## Explaining Collective behavior:

**Contagion/  
convergence**

Social order breaks down in crowds

**Rational  
choice**

Collective behavior solves collective problems

**Emergent  
norms**

Groups develop new norms in face of unexpected situations

**Value-added**

Collective behavior response to strained social situations

# Theories of collective behavior

## Contagion and convergence

- Older theories of collective behavior centered on how crowds form and disperse  
Crowds seen as events where *social order breaks down*
- **Contagion theory:**
  - Crowd membership alters normal behavior
  - Anonymity creates dissociation
  - People caught up in the crowd will do things they otherwise would not (violent, irrational)
  - “Mob mentality”
  - Popular idea but not supported empirically
- **Convergence theory:**
  - Like-minded people will find one another
  - Latent (hidden) desires expressed in crowd
  - “Release” of underlying tendencies
  - Responsibility for personal actions diffused
  - Some similarities to Durkheim’s “collective effervescence”

# Theories of collective behavior

## Rational choice

- Focus on mutually beneficial cooperation
- Going against the grain potentially costly
- Overall cooperation benefits everyone (Prisoners' dilemma)
- Conclusion: cooperative behavior needs a core of committed participants

## Emergent norms

- Interactionist—behavior based on norms
- Norms are expected responses to expected situations
- In unexpected situations, new norms emerge
- Negotiation of what is “acceptable” creates coordination of action



# Theories of collective behavior

## Value-added theory

- Functionalist approach—focus on social strain
- Six conditions for collective action:
  - Structural conduciveness  
(awareness and opportunity)
  - Structural strain  
(e.g. perceived inequality)
  - Spread of generalized belief  
(agreement on clearly-defined problem)
  - Precipitating factors  
(event or ‘spark’ that sets off action)
  - Mobilization for action  
(emergence of networks/leaders pushing action)
  - Failure of social control  
(insufficient intervention by authorities)
- Sees collective action as generally disruptive and undesirable for a functioning society  
Early 1960s

# Image credit



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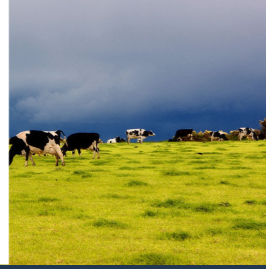


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