21.3B: Types of Social Movements

Social movements occur when large groups of individuals or organizations work for or against change in social and/or political matters.

Learning Objectives

• Discuss the criteria that form the basis of classification of social movements

Key Points

• Cultural Anthropologist David F. Aberle identified four kinds of social movements (alternative, redemptive, reformative, and revolutionary) based on two questions: 1) Who is the movement attempting to change? and 2) How much change is being advocated?.

• Alternative social movements are at the individual level and advocate for minor change; redemptive social movements are at the individual level and advocate for radical changes.

• Reformative social movements occur at a broader group or societal level and advocate for minor changes; revolutionary social movements occur at a broader group or societal level and advocate for radical changes.

• Other ways to categorize social movements include the scope (reform or radical), type of change (innovative or conservative), targets (group-focused or individual-focused), methods (violent or non-violent), and range (local or global).

• Revolutionary social movements occur at a broader group or societal level and advocate for radical changes.

• Other ways to categorize social movements include classifying by scope, type of change, targets, methods, and range.
### Key Terms

- **revolutionary social movements**: Revolutionary movement is a specific type of social movement dedicated to carrying out revolutionary reforms and gain some control of the state. If they do not aim for an exclusive control, they are not revolutionary.

- **reformative social movements**: A reformative social movement advocates for minor changes instead of radical changes. For example, revolutionary movements can scale down their demands and agree to share powers with others, becoming a political party.

- **redemptive social movements**: A redemptive social movement is radical in scope but focused on the individual.

Social movements are a specific type of group action in which large informal groups of individuals or organizations work for or against change in specific political or social issues.

Cultural Anthropologist David F. Aberle described four types of social movements based upon two fundamental questions: (1) who is the movement attempting to change? (2) how much change is being advocated? Social movements can be aimed at change on an individual level, e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous, which is a support group for recovering alcoholics or change on a broader group or even societal level, e.g. anti-globalization. Social movements can also advocate for minor changes such as tougher restrictions on drunk driving (see MADD) or radical changes like prohibition. The diagram below illustrates how a social movement may either be alternative, redemptive, reformative or revolutionary based on who the movement strives to change and how much change the movement desires to bring about.

![Diagram of Aberle's Four Types of Social Movements](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Sociology/Introduction_to_Sociology/Book%3A_Sociology_(Boundless)/21%3A_S...)

Aberle’s Four Types of Social Movements: Based on who a movement is trying to change and how much change a movement is advocating, Aberle identified four types of social movements: redemptive, reformative, revolutionary and alternative.

Other categories have been used to distinguish between types of social movements.

- **Scope**: A movement can be either reform or radical. A reform movement advocates changing some norms or laws while a radical movement is dedicated to changing value systems in some fundamental way. A reform movement might be a trade union seeking to increase workers’ rights while the American Civil Rights movement was a radical movement.

- **Type of Change**: A movement might seek change that is either innovative or conservative. An innovative movement wants to introduce or change norms and values while a conservative movement seeks to preserve existing norms.
and values.

- Targets: Group-focused movements focus on influencing groups or society in general; for example, attempting to change the political system from a monarchy to a democracy. An individual-focused movement seeks to affect individuals.

- Methods of Work: Peaceful movements utilize techniques such as nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience. Violent movements resort to violence when seeking social change.

- Range: Global movements, such as Communism in the early 20th century, have transnational objectives. Local movements are focused on local or regional objectives such as preserving an historic building or protecting a natural habitat.