

**A Review of
Theory of Collective Behavior
by Neil J. Smelser**

Richard Jung¹

Cornell University

Industrial and Labor Relations Review, **19**, 2 (January 1966).
Pp. 318-320.

¹ Kouřimská 24, CZ - 284 01 Kutná Hora, Czech Republic; *Tel / Fax*: +420 327 512 197;
E-mail: Richard.Jung@post.harvard.edu , *URL*: <http://www.RichardJung.cz/> .

Review of *Theory of Collective Behavior* by Neil J. Smelser.

📖 318²

Theory of Collective Behavior. By Neil J. Smelser. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963. xi, 436 pp. \$6.75.

Professor Smelser's aims, in this book, are four: (1) To formulate (the first) comprehensive theory of all forms of collective behavior, encompassing a wide range of phenomena such as panics, revolutions, lynchings, major religious and political movements, fashions, economic booms, religious revivals, and race riots. (2) To provide a sociological explanation for phenomena generally (and largely unsuccessfully) interpreted as psychological manifestations of primitive individual or group mentality. (3) To demonstrate that "it is possible to use the same theoretical framework to analyze both conventional and collective behavior." (4) To accomplish these aims by applying "the logic and substance" of "the theory of action" synthesized from earlier traditions by Parsons, Shils, and Bales.

The theory of action has been regarded, by many of its proponents and critics alike, as inherently restricted to behavior that reflects stability, conformity, and cooperation; is disciplined and predictable; honors institutionalized expectations; and is sustained by the effectiveness of social control. Smelser, in his earlier book (*Social Change in the Industrial Revolution*), already extended this mode of analysis to the study of social change. Here he attempts to employ his modified "action framework" to encompass all the various kinds of behavior whose only apparent common denominator is that they are spontaneous and unpredictable manifestations of social disorder, instability, deviance, and conflict, and whose essence is the defiance of institutionalized expectations.

Evaluation of this volume is difficult. Smelser's explicit description of his variant of the conceptual action framework (unevenly employed in the actual analysis) is not matched by a sufficiently systematic presentation of his theoretical contribution. This focuses attention on conceptual minutiae, when Smelser's main accomplishment may lie elsewhere. Smelser, like most sociologists of this generation, suffers from a compulsion to be explicit, technical, and rigorous when presenting a conceptual system, but becomes shyly implicit and tentative when presenting an explanatory system. Typologies are framed in tables, but propositions are hidden in the text and suggested by examples rather than derived, while methodological issues are banished to footnotes and an overly brief summary chapter.

The theoretical structure, which emerges from the chapters (VI-X), devoted to analyzing various types of collective behavior represents a creative combination of the modes of analysis developed by Pareto, Durkheim, Weber, and Parsons. Smelser's fundamental interpretation of collective behavior is Weberian: each type of collective behavior is distinguished by, and has at its core, a different ideal type of "generalized belief". The characteristic behavior of actors in a type of collective outburst can then be "meaningfully interpreted". Five types of collective behavior are distinguished: the panic, the craze, the hostile outburst, the norm-

² Original page number in:
Industrial and Labor Relations Review, **19**, 2 (January 1966).

oriented, and the value-oriented movement. This conceptualization is Parsonsian: the first two types of beliefs concern facilities, the remaining three roles, norms, and values respectively.

Smelser's method of explanation is (implicitly) Durkheimian: the differential probability of various types of social behavior (non-collective or collective) is a function of differences in situations, which trigger psychological mechanisms in participants and channel or block subsequent actions. Situations are analyzed as a six-dimensional system. The nature of the dimensions can only be inferred from the author's description of the values providing common and distinguishing conditions for various types of collective behavior. These are some kind of structural strain, specific structural conduciveness, specific generalized belief, a precipitating event, mobilization for action, and the effect of social control. The presence of all six kinds of conditions (a situational configuration) is said to be necessary and sufficient to produce a particular type of collective behavior. Yet before the behavior occurs, the participants must perceive the conditions as relevant and related. How and why this happens is not made clear.

Smelser attempts to use a four-by-sevenfold typology of "components of action" to generate the conditions. This attempt, although only partly successful, reflects the author's Parsonsian metaphor of action as the distribution of energy made determinate due to its minute regulation by a multi-dimensional hierarchy of constraints. Variation in action is then accounted for by describing the variation in the configuration of operating constraints. This image of action and a Paretean equilibrium analysis are the format for Smelser's theoretical contribution, namely, his postulation of mechanisms, which explain how the boundary conditions determine the type of social behavior. The Paretean conception of a self-equilibrating social system is reflected in Smelser's master proposition: **"...people under strain mobilize to reconstitute the social order in the name of a generalized belief"**. He formulates three principal mechanisms:

- 1. The response to strain energizes the system by escalating attention to higher levels of concern.** Under some circumstances (structural conduciveness and inadequate social control?) a particular kind of *generalized belief is formed*: it is hysterical (reduces anxiety by unrealistically structuring an ambiguous situation), magical (attributes overwhelming potency to some actual or imagined component of action), and naive (the desired outcome would be realized or the feared outcome averted "if only" the relevant component of action could be activated or deactivated).
- 2. An event interpreted as validating the generalized belief acts as the precipitating episode.** It anchors the formal belief in a concrete context and *short-circuits action*, that is, allows a discharge of energy, regulated only by the generalized belief and the specific circumstance. The usual (social and technical) constraints are bypassed. This lends collective behavior its unrealistic, unrestrained character.
- 3. Potential participants must be mobilized for action.** Smelser discusses the crucial factor of leadership, but does not clearly state whether mobilization is simply the communication of the precipitating episode to other potential participants. He distinguishes, however, between two phases of mobilization: the *real phase*, determined by the original conditions, and the *derived phase*, determined by conditions generated by the real phase. The feedback mechanism (discussed primarily in terms of its possible amplifying effect) is said to account for the growth curve of participation in collective episodes. Its theoretical significance lies in [320](#) its ability to subsume specific mechanism such as imitation, game-theoretic speculation, and emotional contagion.

The operation of social control is treated as one situational condition. It can influence the other five conditions, namely, prevent them, generate them, or change them to conditions for another kind of behavior – or it can be ineffective. This part of the theory, although logically peripheral, needs further development. Smelser discusses specific tactics of prevention (or their failure), but does not explore the various theoretical avenues opened by his own formulation, for example, the symmetry between the mobilization and the social control mechanisms.

Richard Jung
Senior Research Associate and Lecturer
Department of Sociology
Cornell University