Mobilization as a macrosociological conception†

THE CONCEPT

Mobilization is a process in which a social unit gains relatively rapidly in control of resources it previously did not control. The resources might be economic or military, but also political (e.g., support in Congress) or psychological (e.g., new emotional or normative commitments to the social unit). Demobilization occurs when a unit's control of resources is reduced relatively rapidly. Unlike production or integration, mobilization is not a continual process, but one limited to a specific period. While there are continual fluctuations in the amounts of resources a unit controls (e.g., with alterations in the level of tax revenues), unless there is a relatively rapid change, in a given period, it is not fruitful to refer to this change as mobilization.

The concept first was employed to refer to the shifting of resource control from private-civilian to public-military hands. More recently it has been applied to a society's or some other collectivity's deliberate change in the control of other resources, such as new nations' mobilization for development, regional organizations' mobilization for political unification, and the civil rights movement's mobilization of apathetic citizens. The common characteristic of all these processes is that they entail a transformation of the social unit involved. As mobilization advances, as the unit commands more resources, and as more of the available total resources are used jointly rather than individually, the unit increases its ability to act collectively. Capacity to utilize resources, not legal ownership or title to benefits, is what really matters. (A mere increase in resources of members or sub-units or even of the unit does not make for mobilization, though it increases the mobilization potential; only mobilization is the process through which resources, old or new, are made available for collective action, by changing their control. An affluent unit might be thus less mobilized and less able to act than one poor in resources.)

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† This article is an outgrowth of a project conducted under a Social Science Research Council grant. The subject is explored within the context of a theory more fully presented in the author's The Active Society: a Theory of Societal and Political Processes (New York: Free Press, 1968)
Mobilization is the answer to the analytical question of where the energy of social units, be they economic, political, or social, comes from. Like the libido ‘mobilized’ into the various actions of the personality and to energize its mechanisms, so untapped resources of members or sub-units are made available through the processes of mobilization to the action and mechanisms of a social unit. The processes vary immensely in their concrete features but have in common several analytic features which are discussed below.

Mobilization, like policy-making, social planning, and other related concepts, implies a preference for theoretical conceptions which recognize emergent properties of collectivities above and beyond those of individuals. Our conception allows for a collective actor who is capable of guiding societal processes rather than merely being subject to them. Mobilization thus is here viewed as a project, deliberately initiated, guided, and terminated, and not simply as a by-product or outgrowth of ‘interaction’ among social units or as a summation of the decisions of myriad participants. This is not to imply that mobilization has no unanticipated consequences or that the actor is in full control, but there is the assumption of a collective actor—be it a government, an organizational leadership, or a regional council—that mobilizes the resources. The change involved is in part intended.

COMMON ANALYTIC FEATURES

Mobilization processes share several features. First of all, mobilization itself has a cost, that is, some resources are used up to mobilize new resources. Under most conditions, mobilization has a marginal rising cost. Transfer of every additional 10 per cent of the resources to unit control and utilization, costs significantly more than the recruitment of the preceding 10 per cent. All social units’ ability to mobilize is limited by the fact that, after mobilization reaches a given level, to be determined empirically, any additional increase costs more than gains in resources achieved, and hence curtails rather than builds up the social unit’s action capacity.

This mobilization barrier appears in a great variety of social processes: in limiting the amount of taxation a government can levy, in terms of administration costs and, more importantly, in terms of undermining citizens’ motivation to produce; in psychological mobilization by totalitarian regimes, in terms of the fatigue, boredom, and alienation excessive attempts to indoctrinate, generate; and in political mobilization (e.g., as new and ‘floating votes’ are exhausted, mobilizing additional voters requires appealing to members of the
opponent party, which in turn requires dilution of the party programme and image to a point where more voters of the mobilizers’ party are lost than voters of the opposition party are gained).

While every social unit has a mobilization barrier, the barriers differ from culture to culture and from period to period. In general, totalitarian societies can mobilize more readily and stay highly mobilized longer than democratic ones. Modern societies are more mobilized than were most historical societies, developed nations more than developing ones. These differences can be measured by percentage of the G.N.P. that government allocates, percentage of manpower employed or drafted by the government, and by intensity of identification with the nation or national bodies (such as the Party), as against sub-units (such as tribes, local leaders, regions, etc.).

In general, the level of mobilization is low because most resources are controlled by individual and small social units (such as families, friendship and peer groups) and not by societies, large collectivities (such as races and classes) or national organizations (such as armies and churches). This observation is a major way in which social science perceptions of the social world differ from those of common sense, which often implies a ‘high mobilization’ model, and which views expressions of lesser mobilization as signs of weakness, if not degeneration. For instance, public opinion surveys showing that approximately a quarter of the population lacks basic political information (e.g., 28 per cent of the Americans asked in 1965 did not know that there is a Communist government in China) are viewed with alarm. That U.S. labour unions often cannot ‘deliver’ more than a third of their members for the presidential candidate they endorse is seen as a weakness. The social science view stresses that high mobilization is rare, that it is more realistic to compare actual levels of mobilization to each other rather than to the abstract notion of full mobilization. Thus, labour unions which can deliver 30 per cent of the vote might well have a higher capacity for mobilizing their members than most other voluntary associations. And for three-quarters of the public to know the right answer on any information question not related to its daily life is for its attention to be highly mobilized indeed.

On most matters in most collectivities most of the time, especially in modern pluralistic societies, more resources are spent by the person and his family and peer unit than by any larger social unit. In other words, most resources most of the time are not mobilized for societal purposes. This explains the ‘surprising’ increase in the capacity of societal action when the mobilization barriers are sharply reduced, for instance in crisis situations. Thus under conditions of natural disaster many communities have shown a capacity to construct rapidly large networks of public assistance. They draw on the redistribution of resource control, particularly in utilizing time citizens usually
spend in private pursuits, for public service. Nations, for instance Britain from 1939 to 1941, have succeeded in marshalling for their defence very large production capacities which are usually not available for collective action. In the pre-mobilization days of the mid-1950's, the civil rights movement in Chicago, a city of 750,000 negroes, some of them quite well off, could not raise $10,000 for the Urban League. N.A.A.C.P. meetings were attended by less than fifty people, and of 300 negro lawyers, rarely more than three or four were willing to do volunteer work for legal defence of victims of racial persecution. With the crisis period of 1963–64, much larger amounts of money and manpower were available.

Even under crisis conditions, the popular notion of full mobilization is without foundation. Even high mobilization, in terms of the total amount of a collectivity's or society's resources is rare. From 1960 to 1965 the civil rights movement was greatly helped by a student movement of the North, but actually not more than 5,000 students, or less than one out of every hundred, were involved. Similarly, only a small fraction of southern negroes was involved in the various sit-ins, demonstrations, and marches. Thus the image of the popular uprising as involving 'the' peasants, workers, negroes, or colonial people is almost invariably far from accurate. The mass membership of the groups involved is usually only marginally involved; that is, its mobilization is rather low and limited to some economic support and general sympathy for the movement. Actually, the resources mobilized—those that energize such transformations as revolutions, de-colonization, and wars of independence—often are only a small fraction of the total resources available. To put it more succinctly, major societal changes are propelled by small changes in the level of mobilization.

ACTION AND COUNTER-MOBILIZATION

The effect of mobilization is determined only in part by the amount of resources made available for the collective usage of the mobilizing actor; it is also determined by the amount of counter-mobilization the initial movement triggers. Mobilization often precedes attempts to produce a change either in the relations between two units or among the sub-units that make up a given unit. This is the case because existing social patterns usually are supported by a parallel distribution of power, vested interests, social habits, and ideological underpinnings. He who seeks change as a rule has to support his action by power greater than his share in the existing distribution. Hence mobilization often precedes an attempt to act, to introduce a change, as some resistance is generally to be expected and hence resources to handle it need to be built up.
Quite often the very act of mobilization triggers a mobilization process by opponents of the particular change which mobilization is expected to support. The civil rights movement in the early 1960's mobilized the southern whites. The U.S. and the U.S.S.R., in the period between 1947 and 1964, continually mobilized each other in what was referred to as the arms race. Similarly, political mobilization of forces favouring agrarian reform in Latin America is often paralleled by political mobilization of those opposed to it.

The action capacity of a unit is much affected by its net mobilization, that is, its mobilization minus the counter-mobilization that its opponents marshall. One of the universal strategic problems of mobilization is how to ensure that the mode in which one is mobilizing will trigger as little counter-mobilization as possible, at least not more than the unit itself can hope to achieve. This is by no means always accomplished. The Soviet Union's production of new missiles in the late 1950's, perceived in the U.S. as creating a 'missile gap', triggered an American counter-mobilization much larger than the initial Soviet effort. American students burning draft cards in 1965, to marshall the public's attention to their objections to U.S. war policy in Vietnam, produced large demonstrations in support of the policy and adamant rejection of their critiques of the war. The percentage of Americans supporting greater involvement in Vietnam increased. Gallup asked a national sample of Americans: 'If a candidate for Congress in your district advocated sending a great many more men to Vietnam, would you be more inclined or less inclined to vote for him?' In September 1965, before the demonstrations, 33 per cent said they were more inclined. By mid-November their number rose to 46 per cent. Other answers to similar questions indicated the same trend.

While actors attempt to minimize counter-mobilization, they try to maximize support of allies; success, in terms of the goals of the actors under study, almost invariably involve mobilization of allies. Israel's successful anti-colonial effort in 1948 cannot be understood without the support of American Jewry, India's independence without the support of the British Labour Party, the Southern civil rights movement without the support of Northern white liberals and the federal government, the British war effort without the support of the U.S., and the Puerto Rican 'boot strap' development, without North American capital, New York City relief laws, and U.S. federal income tax concessions. The tendency is to play down the ally's role and to build up the actor's. Actually, the secret of success often lies in the fact that the ally is much more affluent (in economic, military or political terms) than the actors in the field. Hence, even a small mobilization on the part of an ally might suffice to tip the scale.
The concept of mobilization is often found in discussions of modernization. Here it is widely associated with the transition of control of resources from sub-societies (tribes, villages) to national units. The term is used to refer to increased exposure to national mass media (which makes the society's members more accessible to the national government), the movement of labour force from traditional to modern pursuits, increased education, loss of traditional religious viewpoints, a rise in secular political identification, etc. This approach is most explicitly and systematically represented by a frequently quoted article of Karl W. Deutsch.

The relation of mobilization to modernization is obviously intimate; two pitfalls, however, are to be avoided. First, mobilization ought not to be used as a synonym for modernization because we then have two terms for one process and none for the one designated here as mobilization. There is much to modernization that is not mobilization, particularly the use of the resources mobilization has made available. And there are mobilization processes that do not lead to modernization, as, for instance, when part of the resources built up are used for war (e.g., between India and Pakistan) or continental ambitions (e.g. Nkrumah's Ghana). Actually, mobilization of traditional groups might well be a major source of resistance to modernization. One reason why the two concepts occasionally are confused is that the same concrete process might serve both. Education, for example, might enhance the ability of a society to draw the population into national service and make easier the introduction of modern administrative or production technique. But analytically, the two changes—increase in the resources a unit controls and their use for modernization—are best kept apart.

Second, several authorities tend to assume that mobilization barriers are lower (e.g., capacity to mobilize for a given cost is higher), the more disintegrated is the traditional society. The break-up of the traditional village and family life is viewed as a prerequisite for the mobilization of the population into modern societal frameworks. Deutsch, for instance, first defines mobilization as modernization: 'Social mobilization is a name given to an overall process of change, which happens to substantial parts of the population in countries which are moving from traditional to modern way of life.' He then sees mobilization as following an integration-distintegration-reintegration sequence: '... social mobilization can be defined, therefore, as the process in which major clusters of old social, economic and psychological commitments are eroded or broken and people become available for new patterns of socialization and behaviour.' The assumption that mobilization or modernization requires disintegra-
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tion of traditional social units is a proposition to be tested; it should not be part of the definition of the concept. It seems partially true; that is, it is true under some circumstances.

Some weakening of traditional ties and identifications probably enhances mobilization for modernization, but by no means is this ability greater the more disintegrated and, hence, anomic the old structures have become. First of all highly disintegrated groups have their own particular barriers to mobilization. Their membership is hard to organize (e.g., farm hands, slum dwellers), lacks social discipline, and tends to be psychologically rigid and socially deviant, which makes learning of new behaviour patterns difficult and social control costly. The mobilization barrier of such groups for national projects might be as high, if not higher, than those of traditional ones. Second, traditional units can serve as effective foundations of mobilization for modernity if they are transformed rather than disintegrated.

An example might illustrate this point. Shortly after the state of Israel was founded there was a wave of mass immigration from a large number of countries. The immigrants differed considerably in terms of their cultural background, level of education, language, and so forth. The best way to integrate these immigrants rapidly into Israeli society, it was believed, was to break up the immigrant groups and to ‘mix’ their members in modern units, such as classrooms, army platoons, and new settlements. Unable to communicate with each other in their respective languages and to reinforce each other’s culture, they would have to speak Hebrew and absorb the Israeli culture. Disintegration of the old groups would open the way to new integration. The result was a ritualistic adherence to the old norms set in, and it became evident that change required gaining the support of the existing leadership of the traditional groups or providing them with new leadership, i.e. required maintaining the groups while transforming their culture and structure rather than ‘eroding’ or ‘breaking’ them.¹⁰

In some cases modernization might entail demobilization rather than mobilization, at least in the sense that less commitment to the collectivity would be demanded and more room would be given to private initiative. The rise of Western industrial societies, especially those which arose out of absolutist states, and the political liberalization of the economics of communist totalitarian societies, have such demobilization aspects. For countries now developing, various levels of mobilization and demobilization might be combined, such as mobilization of the extended families and demobilization of castes.

It is important to note that mobilization refers always to a particular unit, and what is mobilization for one unit often is demobilization for another. For example, an increase in national control of
economic resources implies a decline in the control of some other unit or units. It therefore is essential to keep the reference unit fixed for any single study, and surely modernization does not involve mobilization of all units.

MOBILIZATION AND POLITICAL UNIFICATION

Mobilization is a change of control and not of the level of resources per se. Increasing the output of a unit per se does not increase its capacity to act, only its potential ability, because the new resources might not be mobilized for the particular line of action under observation or for any action by the unit under study, but only for actions of sub-units or supra-units. It therefore is of especial interest to note a finding by Deutsch, et al., that historical processes of political unification were preceded not by a mere increase in resources but by increases in the capacity to mobilize through improvement in administrative and communication capabilities. And these increases were not merely of any unit, but of the one which led the process and was willing to invest the new resources gained in mobilization. This in turn served political unification. Prussia served as such a ‘core’ unit in the unification of Germany, and Piedmont in that of Italy.¹¹

Unification entails a shift of resource control from the integrating units to the rising communities. As such, it has a cost which the resources gained through mobilization serve to cover. Etzioni showed that these resources might be made available by an ‘external elite’. This, however, tends to have distorting effects on the development of the rising polity’s institutional shell. In the West Indies, for instance, Britain provided money and administrative skills to assist in the federation of ten islands. This permitted the federation to be initiated with limited indigenous mobilization. But Britain also provided for disproportionately high representation of the small islands in the federal institutions, which ultimately was one of the reasons why the larger islands seceded.¹² The price of low mobilization was not only lack of support, but also an indigenous institutional shell that did not fit, nor adjust sufficiently, to local socio-political reality.

MOBILIZATION OF COMMITMENTS

Mobilization brings to mind, especially for non-social scientists, the mobilization of manpower (e.g., calling up reserves to military service) and of economic resources (e.g., floating bonds, or nationalization). No less important is the mobilization of loyalties. The very existence of a society requires some extension of loyalties beyond micro-social units such as family and peer group. The level of a society’s integration is much affected by the degree to which members
identify with it as a community as against the degree to which they identify with sub-communities—such as races, classes, or regions. What is one’s prime loyalty: Virginia or the Union? One’s religious or racial group, or the Nation? The process of political unification is one in which the prime loyalty in political matters is shifted from communities that used to be the prime focus to a new political community, which is becoming the centre.

Most societies manipulate the level of commitments, be it through war dances in primitive tribes or through church support of the king in medieval societies. Modern societies typically have more facilities and invest more resources in building up a comparatively high level of national commitment. This deliberate effort to shift commitments from other units to the society, or to shift the commitments of these units to the society, is the mobilization of commitments. It is particularly high in periods preceding or during war, civil strife, and revolutions.\textsuperscript{13}

In non-crisis periods, the level of mobilization of commitments varies, each level posing its own problems. Comparatively high levels of mobilization, common in totalitarian societies, require considerable expenditure and increase the danger of ‘backlash’, resulting in alienation from party slogans, disregard of official news, etc.\textsuperscript{14} On the other hand, lower levels of mobilization make totalitarian regimes vulnerable to the rise of opposition; unmobilized commitments might be drawn upon by internal or external ‘enemies’ of the regime. Totalitarian movements often are based on the mobilization of social groups, especially the peasants, which are left uncommitted by authoritarian regimes. The movements typically arise in societies and periods in which the peasantry is becoming available to mobilization and not where it is most ‘undeveloped’; in Cuba, not in Haiti; in Vietnam, not in Nepal.

Democratic societies, on the other hand, function well on lower levels of mobilization of political commitments. They exhibit a higher commitment to the system than to any one party, and a considerable amount of apathy (i.e., low mobilization). Apathy functions to provide a ‘floating vote’, which sustains inter-party competition. If all voters were highly committed to one party or another, the minority party could not expect to gain a majority and, if matters of much importance to its members arose, it probably would resort to extra-constitutional means to obtain its goals. Actually, in many well-established democracies not more than a third of the voters are members of any party, and substantial percentages of the voters shift from party to party in each election.\textsuperscript{15}

This is, of course, not to imply that, the lower the level of mobilization of political commitments, the higher the democratic quality of the polity. When interest in information about the political process
is low, and when most voters are not much concerned over which party is in power, oligarchic and corrupt regimes are likely to prevail. This holds especially common among local governments and voluntary associations, such as labour unions, where most members' level of commitment often is low.

EMPirical MeASURES

Measuring mobilization requires: (a) specification of the unit for which the measurement is made; (b) the period under study; (c) the ratio of resources under unit control as against that of sub-units or supra-units at the beginning as compared to the end of the period; (d) specification of the kinds of resources studied. Which resources are included depends on the kind of mobilization in which one is interested—economic, political, etc.

It is relatively easy to measure mobilization of manpower in terms of the number of people employed or drafted by the mobilizing unit as against those not so recruited. For instance, changes in the ratio of federal over state and local employees measure changes in national versus subnational controls. The same holds for percentage of G.N.P. taxed and inter-unit distribution of the expenditure of funds, for instance, federal vs. local, or kings vs. local feudal lords. Measurement of the changes in degree of commitment is more difficult to achieve, but attitude changes expressed in public opinion polls are one example. Changes in the frequency of use of various symbols in the press have been used to study historical changes of loyalties.

A detailed attempt to measure mobilization along seven different dimensions in 19 countries is provided by Karl Deutsch. The sources used would serve many other studies of mobilization. They include the United Nations Report on World Social Situation and U.N. Compendium of Social Statistics. More recent and useful is the World Handbook of Political and Social Indicators.

Notes


2. For a survey of these studies, and conditions under which mobilization works as against those under which it does not work, see Allen H. Barton, Social Organization Under Stress, Publication 1032, Washington, D.C., National Academy of Science, 1963.


4. Los Angeles Times, 21 Nov. 1965. Other factors were at work at the same
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time and it is impossible to prove conclusively a cause and effect relation. But analysis of letters to the editor, editorials and such, seems to support our conclusion.


After this article was written a thoughtful and encompassing book was published on our subject which we could not take into account. See J. P. Nettl, *Political Mobilization*, London, Faber & Faber, 1967.