

QUALIFYING EXAM

Social Movements

The questions below are the qualifying exam in the area of Social Movements. You must answer one question from each of the three sections below in an essay format. Each answer should be a self-contained essay approximately 8–10 pages long (i.e., 2,000–2,500 words). In the essay, you must cite referenced works and include a bibliography. One comprehensive bibliography for all three questions will be sufficient. You may consult materials from the reading list you've been provided, as well as any other scholarly sources you've read during the exam period.

Section 1—Choose and answer one of the following questions:

Question 1:

Theories of social movements have long searched for the spark: grievances, resources, political openings, emotions, framing, disruption. Each has had its moment, each has its champions. But real-world movements rarely cooperate so neatly with theory.

Critically evaluate major approaches to explaining the emergence and dynamics of social movements. How do different traditions account for why movements begin, persist, or fade? What are the limits of these frameworks when applied to contemporary or historical cases?

In your response, reflect on whether any theory—structural or cultural, rational or affective—can capture the full mess of collective action.

Question 2:

In an era of porous borders and planetary crises, movements increasingly operate across national lines. But does this make them more powerful—or more precarious?

Assess the challenges and possibilities of transnational activism. How do activists build solidarity across contexts shaped by vastly unequal power, culture, and infrastructure? What distinguishes transnational movements from their domestic counterparts—and what stays stubbornly the same?

In your response, consider the tools, networks, and dilemmas that define contentious politics in the age of globalization.

Section 2-Choose and answer one of the following questions:

Question 1:

Currently, it seems that the literature on contentious politics, including social movement theories, have paid insufficient theoretical attention to 'leaders' and 'leadership'. This gap may be due to the fact that contentious collective action focuses on groups and collectives, not individuals. What are your thoughts on this idea? Is it a limitation in social movement theory? Why or why not? Do you see any potential solutions to address this oversight? How can we adopt a perspective that effectively incorporates the influence of individuals, such as leaders, in contentious collective action?

Question 2:

What is now known as 'Social Movement Theory' has largely emerged from the context of open, technologically advanced, and liberal democratic Western societies. To what extent can these Western perspectives account for the dynamics of mobilization in non-Western and undemocratic settings? Are there any 'Southern' perspectives that help address this gap in the literature? Discuss with examples

Section 3 -Choose and answer one of the following questions:

Question 1:

Social movements have long been shaped by their relationships to the state, which can act as both an opponent and an enabler of collective action. Drawing on major theoretical and empirical works, analyze how different types of state structures, institutions, and practices influence the emergence, strategies, and outcomes of social movements. How do movements in turn shape the state? Discuss with reference to at least two historical or contemporary examples.

Question 2:

Social movements face a range of strategic choices as they seek to achieve their goals, including whether to engage in conventional political tactics, disruptive nonviolence, or violence. Drawing on sociological theories of social movements and relevant empirical research, analyze how movements choose among different strategies. What factors influence the turn to violence or nonviolence? Evaluate the consequences of these choices for movement effectiveness, state response, and legitimacy. Use two historical or contemporary examples in your answer.