

Book Review: What is a Social Movement? by Hank Johnston

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*Focusing on movement organizations and networks, what they do, and how they articulate their ideas of justice and collective interests, **What is a Social Movement?** aims to lay the essential groundwork for understanding this significant and exciting field of research, where it came from, and where it is headed. What makes this book so useful is how thoroughly it maps the topography of social movement research. It not only summarizes particular approaches and tendencies within the literature, but also draws out the points of contention between them and illuminates the fault lines upon which social movements research has grown and changed over the previous century, writes **Mark Carrigan**.*

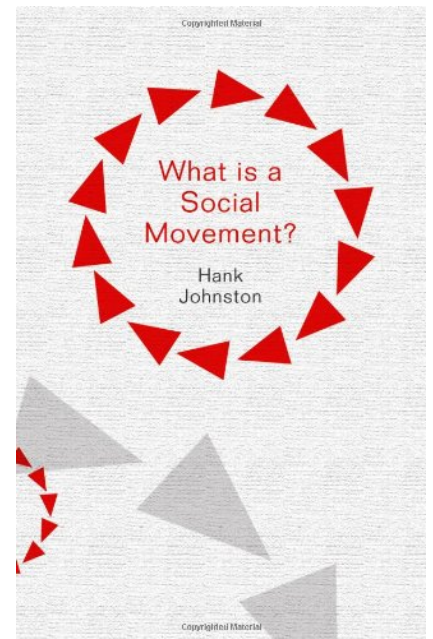
What is a Social Movement? Hank Johnston. Polity Press. February 2014.

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Something very odd happened at the end of 2011. Time Magazine nominated 'The Protestor' as their Person of the Year. How did such a once reviled and satirised figure come to receive this mainstream acclamation? The magazine themselves invoked the End of History thesis, suggesting that the protesters who had shaped liberal democracies in the '60s and '70s had become passé with the fall of the Berlin wall and the ascendancy of capitalism to untrammelled status across the globe. But with this era drawing to a close and finance capitalism seemingly struggling for survival, the "protester once again became a maker of history".

The Arab Spring protests that inspired this choice have since led somewhere altogether darker than was hoped by commentators in the upswell of breathless optimism that accompanied them. The Occupy movement, towards which liberal opinion was decidedly more ambivalent, no longer enjoys the prominence it briefly did. It would be silly to suggest that Time's endorsement had any role in the subsequent perceived decline of these movements, if indeed this is the correct term for them, but I nonetheless found it hard not to ponder the correlation. It seemed to indicate something interesting about the significance of contemporary social movements but also the contradictory nature of their relationship with the media, in part seeking the publicity the media afforded but also at risk of being pacified by it.

Against this backdrop Social Movement Studies comes to seem one of the most significant areas of interdisciplinary research within the social sciences. Developing alongside the social movements which have been its object, contemporary social movement studies has become a vast and multifaceted tradition of inquiry. Speaking as someone who has been making a concerted effort to familiarise myself with the area over the last six months, the sheer size of this detailed and interconnected literature can be a barrier to new readers, whether they are aspiring social movements researchers or those with a more casual interest in the field. It is for this reason that [Hank Johnston](#)'s book *What is a Social Movement?* is so valuable, offering a broad and accessible overview of this field by someone who has been at the centre of it through both his own research and position as founding editor of the journal *Mobilization*.





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It's difficult to choose particular chapters to focus upon from this book, reflecting both its consistent excellence and its affable brevity. I found the second chapter particularly useful, offering a perspicuous overview of this expansive literature. It identifies a series of influential approaches and explains them clearly while nonetheless avoiding the sort of irritating simplification that routinely afflicts text books about theory. Beginning from Gustave Le Bon's now largely rejected social psychological account of crowd behaviour, Johnston adroitly demonstrates how the social movements literature has been recurrently structured around a conflict between those researchers who, like Le Bon, conceive collective action as exceptional and irrational and those who see it as a rational extension of 'normal' politics. The clarity with which Johnston draws out these tendencies across the literature reflects the depth of his own engagements over his career. I found this immensely useful, almost equivalent to having a jovial senior academic volunteer to sit down and talk you through a literature you're unfamiliar with.

The weakest chapter comes at the end of the book. This is a shame because it is in this chapter that Johnston tries to draw out the contemporary relevance of Social Movement Studies. The chapter feels somewhat rushed, lacking the measured pace which plays such an important role in ensuring the clarity of his exposition elsewhere in the book. He addresses topics like digital mobilisation and tactical occupations but does so rather briefly, in a way which makes it hard not to wonder if he secretly wanted to write a longer book than this. The final chapter simply doesn't cohere as well as those that preceded it.

What makes this book so useful is how thoroughly it maps the topography of social movement research. It not only summarizes particular approaches and tendencies within the literature, but also draws out the points of contention between them and illuminates the fault lines upon which social movements research has grown and changed over the previous century. The relative brevity of the book makes this achievement all the more impressive. It is a short book, well under 200 pages, which nonetheless offers an admirably panoramic perspective upon a complex and detailed field of research. *What is a Social Movement?* is an invaluable book, sign posting a vast literature in an accessible way likely to appeal to students and academics alike. While some of the contents may be challenging to those without a social scientific background, Johnston's prose is nonetheless clear enough that the book could be of interest to a more general reader seeking to better understand the ways in which social movements have shaped the world in which we live and are currently reshaping our collective futures.

Mark Carrigan is a sociologist based in the Centre for Social Ontology at the University of Warwick. He edits the *Sociological Imagination* and is an assistant editor for *Big Data & Society*. His research interests include asexuality studies, sociological theory and digital sociology. He's a [regular blogger and podcaster](#). [Read more reviews by Mark](#).

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