



# Society in Action: The Theory of Social Becoming

*Piotr Sztompka*

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## **Society in Action: The Theory of Social Becoming** Piotr Sztompka

In *Society in Action*, Piotr Sztompka sets forth a highly topical contribution to central theoretical debates of contemporary sociology. Taking the idea and practice of collective mobilization as his theme, Sztompka argues that modern institutions, particularly of late, are characterized by an increasing awareness of collective empowerment. The most obvious concrete expression of this phenomenon, as Sztompka makes clear, is the rise of a diversity of active social movements such as those which dramatically transformed Europe in the 1980s, from the birth of Solidarity in 1980 to the 1989 "Autumn of Nations."

Sztompka connects the interpretations of such collective activity to a wider grasp of the nature of social action. The result is a comprehensive and original theory of social change which focuses on the self-transforming influence on society of its members' striving for freedom, autonomy, and self-fulfillment. He develops his theory by means of a general concept of "social becoming," the roots of which he traces to the early romantic and humanist work of Karl Marx and his followers and to two influential sociological schools of today, the theory of agency and historical sociology.

Sztompka situates his theory midway between the rigid determinism of social totalities and the unbridled voluntarism of free individuals. Social change, he demonstrates, can be understood neither as the outcome of individual actions taken alone nor as structurally determined actions. Instead, he confers upon social organizations and movements a "self-transcending" quality: they express human agency yet, by virtue of their active character, are quite often able to achieve unpredictable outcomes.

Throughout his analysis of social movements and revolutions in history, Sztompka emphasizes the dynamics of spontaneous social change generated from below—a theoretical testimony to the rapid and fundamental social change in Eastern Europe in recent history. Against the fashions of postmodernist malaise, boredom, and disenchantment, his theory of social becoming expresses the possibility of emancipation, of change leading to positive gains. His work registers a belief in progress, not inevitably gained, but its attainment fully dependent upon the creativity and optimism of an active citizenry.

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