

Summaries

The 'white' protest movement in Belgium as a moral crusade: The entwinement of emotions and politics

by Marc Hooghe

Since 1996 the Belgian political system has been confronted with a 'white' protest movement, culminating in the White March which assembled 300.000 protesters on 20 October 1996. The movement originated as an emotional protest against the murder of young girls. As it became clear that authorities had bungled the research into the killings, the protest became more politically oriented. The innocence of the victims was contrasted with the perceived arrogance and dysfunctioning of the authorities. This moral indignation made it possible to mobilise a pre-existing feeling of distrust towards authorities, which is particularly widespread in the country. The white movement can be interpreted as a moral crusade (Gusfield 1963), but differentiating it from other such crusades, state institutions themselves have become the target of discontent. This rejection of the basic rules of the Belgian political system, makes it difficult for the political elite to respond effectively to this mobilisation.

The white mobilisation in Belgium: The sociological movement theory revisited?

by Stefaan Walgrave and Benoît Rihoux

The white mass mobilisation, the popular protest and the birth of the white movement as a reaction to the Dutroux-murders in Belgium, are challenging case for current social movement theory. Extensive empirical analysis of white movement members and participants of the white marches seriously questions ideas central to movement theory. The broad social profile of the white movement members, the lack of specific mobilisation issues and the absence of any formal organisations are hard to grasp from a conventional theoretical point of view. For sociologists some white lessons are to be learned from this 'new emotional movement'. On the other hand the white movement is confronted by some robust sociological 'laws'. As the spontaneous anger and emotions in the larger population dwindle, the movement has to become organised and needs to make topical choices to safeguard its survival. So, for white movement members some sociological lessons are to be learned.

The White March as a media product: The press as a mobilisation alternative to social movements organisations

by Stefaan Walgrave and Jan Manssens

300.000 demonstrators at the White March in Brussels on the 20th of October '96 left many sociologists speechless. They witnessed by far the largest demonstration in Belgian history but were struck by the total absence of any mobilisation machinery. The thesis presented here suggests that it was the press that acted as an adequate alternative to intermediary organisations and as such was responsible for the huge success of the White March. Focusing on the coverage of the Dutroux-case in 5 Flemish newspapers during the 3 months leading up to the demonstration, the authors argue that there is sufficient evidence to state that the media produced the White March. They demonstrate empirically how the different thresholds central to conventional mobilisation theory were passed by the press. The article concludes that if it wasn't for the media, the White March hadn't been such a success.