

This Week's Citation Classic

Wallace A F.C. Revitalization movements. *Amer. Anthropol.* 58:264-81, 1956.
[University of Pennsylvania. Philadelphia. PA]

The *American Anthropologist* article suggests that many phenomena of major cultural-system innovation are characterized by a uniform process, *revitalization*, which is discussed as a concept and in its processual dimensions. [The *SSCI*® and the *A&HCI*® indicate that this paper has been cited in more than 270 publications.]

Recurrent Patterns in Social Movements

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Comparison of social movements has shown that a surprisingly consistent sequence of events occurs, irrespective of the religious or secular nature of the movement. Despite cultural differences, these *revitalization movements*, as they are termed,^{1,2} are a type of natural phenomenon centered around a charismatic leader; his "code," or sacred message calling for radical change; and an enthusiastic following. Study of these movements has revealed much about the processes of social and cultural change.

My interest in the study of social movements grew out of an early fascination with the history of American Indians, particularly the Iroquois and Delaware of the northeastern US. As a teenager I went along with my father, Paul Wallace, a historian of Indian-white relations in the colonial period, on visits to several Iroquois reservations, and I hand-copied hundreds of pages of colonial manuscripts for him in the days before the Xerox machine was invented. In the course of these excursions, I learned about the new religion of Handsome Lake, which had been introduced to the Iroquois in the early 1800s. After earning my PhD (1950) in cultural anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, specializing in American Indian studies, I returned to the subject of Handsome Lake and, with the support of a Faculty Research Fellowship from the Social Science Research Council, began a long-planned study of the life and times of Handsome Lake, the Iroquois prophet.

In the course of this biographical research, however, I decided I needed to read about

other religious prophets and social reformers, not only among American Indians, but also around the world, including American Indian "nativistic movements" like the Ghost Dance (which prompted the infamous massacre at Wounded Knee), "cargo cults" in Melanesia, "terre sans mal" migrations in South America, and even the origin of the great religions and their various divisions. My assistant, Sheila Steen, a graduate student in anthropology at Penn, and I were amazed at the similarity of process in these movements, for which she suggested the term *revitalization movement*. The biographical study of Handsome Lake was put on the shelf, and with the support of a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health, we began to collect published and unpublished data, eventually developing a file at Penn on several hundred revitalization movements around the world.

The general description of the type was published in the *American Anthropologist* paper in 1956. It defined a revitalization movement as "a deliberate, organized effort by [some] members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture," centered in a sacred message enunciated by a prophet or maximum leader, stating what is wrong with the society now, what it should be like in the future, and how to get from now to utopia. The place of revitalization movements in the general context of religion was discussed in my text *Religion*,¹ and the type case (the new religion of Handsome Lake) was finally presented under the title *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*.²

Although the model most closely fits the course of events in small, preindustrial societies, it is also applicable to some movements in large industrialized states (cf. Hitler and National Socialism in Germany, the Ayatollah Khomeini and Islamic fundamentalism in Iran, and even Gorbachev and *perestroika* in the Soviet Union). Awareness of the revitalization process, and of the motivational power of utopian thinking by masses mobilized behind a charismatic leader, may be a useful antidote to over-reliance on rational decision-making models for predicting the behavior of societies in the throes of social movements.

1. Wallace A F.C. *Religion: an anthropological view*. New York: Random House, 1966. 300 p. (Cited 170 times.)
2. *The death and rebirth of the Seneca*. New York: Knopf, 1970. 384 p. (Cited 70 times.)

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