

1

The Political Context of Social Movements

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Introduction

Social movements are an inherently complex, multifaceted set of phenomena, permitting any number of viable analytic perspectives. The first modern perspective on movements was psychological (Adorno et al. 1950; Hoffer 1951; Kornhauser 1959; Le Bon 1960; Smelser 1962). But the emergence and consolidation of a distinct field of social movement studies after the 1960s brought with it the development of analytic frameworks that emphasized the organizational (McCarthy and Zald 1973, 1977), economic (McAdam 1982; Paige 1975; Piven and Cloward 1977; Schwartz 1976), cultural (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994; Melucci 1985; Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1988), demographic (Goldstone 1991), and network (Diani 1995; Diani and McAdam 2003; Gould 1991, 1993, 1995; McAdam 1986; McAdam and Paulsen 1993; Snow, Zurcher, and Eckland-Olson 1980) dimensions of social movements.

In the 1950s and the 1960s, scholars of contentious politics took the relations between social movements and their social and economic contexts seriously: In his classic, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1966), E.P. Thompson charted how industrialization shaped the future class consciousness and forms of collective action of English workers; Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé, in *Captain Swing* (1975), showed how machine-breaking was a response to technological innovation; and in *The Vendée* (1964), Charles Tilly found that the urbanization in Western France produced a secular middle class that found just what it needed in the French Revolution. Politics, for these early specialists, was part of the transmission belt from socio-economic structure to movements.

The first hints of a more political contextual framework for understanding and analyzing movements can be glimpsed in the work of two political scientists writing in the early 1970s. Michael Lipsky (1970: 14) urged scholars to be skeptical of system characterizations presumably true for all times and places. Lipsky argued

that the ebb and flow of movement activity was responsive to changes that left institutional authorities either vulnerable or receptive to the demands of particular challengers. Three years later, another political scientist, Peter Eisinger (1973: 11) deployed the concept of *political opportunity structure* to help account for variation in riot behavior in American cities. But it would remain for a pair of sociologists to translate the central insights of Lipsky and Eisinger into a more systematic analytic framework emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between social movements and systems of institutionalized politics.

In 1978, Tilly elaborated on these conceptual beginnings by devoting a full chapter of his landmark book, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, to the important facilitating effect of “political opportunity” in emergent collective action. Four years later the key premise underlying the work of Lipsky, Eisinger, and Tilly was incorporated as one of the central tenets of a new *political process* model of social movements (McAdam 1982). Like the other early proponents of the general perspective, both Tilly and McAdam argued that the timing and ultimate fate of movements were powerfully shaped by the variable opportunities afforded challengers by changes in the institutional structure of political systems and shifting policy preferences and alliances of established “polity members” (Gamson 1990). Soon after, three political scientists added a cross-sectional specification to the temporal changes in opportunity structure: Kitschelt (1986) compared “new social movements” in four democracies, according to the strength or weakness of the state; Kriesi et al. (1995), working in four European democracies, and Tarrow (1989), working on “cycles of protest,” took the political opportunity perspective to Europe.

Since then, countless movement analysts have contributed to the ongoing elaboration of the general political process framework. So thoroughgoing has this elaboration been that we cannot hope to summarize all the extensions and nuances now associated with the perspective. In our structure for the chapter, however, we have tried to accommodate at least some of the more recent and, in our view, important critiques and “friendly amendments” that continue to make the analysis of the political context of movements a vital and central component of the overall field of study. More specifically, the chapter is organized into three main sections. The first deals with the ways in which the more *enduring* features of institutionalized politics help us understand the different fate of the same movements cross-nationally or cross-sectionally within the same state. The second section deals with how the *variable and changing* features of institutionalized political systems influence the emergence and subsequent ebb and flow of movement activity. While these two analytic agendas are the oldest in the political process tradition and continue to structure much of the work on political context, they hardly exhaust all the work that has defined the framework over the years. We will bring the chapter to a close with a section devoted to what we see as: (1) the most important lines of criticism; and (2) theoretical extensions currently enriching the perspective.

Enduring Opportunities and Their Effects on Contention

The underlying assumption of this section is that *stable* political contexts – both within and across regimes – condition contentious politics. This is not to assume that the internal properties of movements – i.e., their organizations, resources, composition,

and demands – or characteristics of the individuals within them are unimportant; only that these properties, which are examined in other contributions to this volume, are channeled through political contexts that shape the directions they take and the relative disposition of actors to follow one or another route to collective action.

There is a general tendency – especially among critics – to characterize the political process model as if political opportunities automatically lead to movement emergence or success. While there may be applications of the model that embrace this stark a view, in McAdam's (1982) original formulation, favorable opportunities were just one of three factors that condition the emergence and impact of a movement. It is the confluence of political opportunities, indigenous organizational capacity, and the emergence of an oppositional consciousness (or "cognitive liberation") that shape the rise of a movement and its prospects for success. And of these, the third was seen as the real catalyst to emergent mobilization. To quote McAdam:

Expanding political opportunities and indigenous organization do not, in any simple sense, produce a social movement ... Together they only offer insurgents a certain "structural potential" for collective political action. Mediating between opportunity and action are people and the subjective meanings they attach to their situation.

(1982: 48)

Moreover, consistent with the focus on effective tactics, McAdam's stress on the crucial role of "tactical innovation" in shaping the pace and impact of the civil rights struggle further reinforces the initial formulation of the political process model. We will turn to the "repertoire of contention" below; here it is sufficient to point out that the ultimate impact of a movement depends on the ongoing interaction of the regime context with the specific goals and strategic decisions of challengers and incumbents alike. We see five properties of a regime that help shape perceptions of political opportunities/threats, and a sixth that we will elaborate in the second section: (1) the multiplicity of independent centers of power within the regime; (2) its openness to new actors and movements; (3) the instability of current political alignments; (4) the availability of influential allies or supporters; (5) the extent to which the regime suppresses or facilitates collective claims; and (6) changes in these properties.

Multiple centers of power provide challengers with the chance to "venue shop" for the most welcoming part of the regime; the regime's *openness to new actors* enables new groups to make claims on elites; *stable alignments* generally mean that many political actors have no potential allies in power, the *availability of influential allies or supporters* strengthens movements outside the gates of the polity; and *regime suppression or facilitation* discourages or encourages the emergence of movements. Threats vary in different opportunity structures, and over time, as we will show in the second section. Most people who mobilize do so to combat threats and risks, but also to take advantage of enduring opportunities (Goldstone and Tilly 2001).

Movements do not mobilize against "objective" threats or take advantage of "objective" opportunities. Threats and opportunities pass through a process of *social construction and attribution*. "No opportunity, however objectively open, will invite mobilization unless it is a) visible to potential challengers, and b) perceived as an opportunity. The same holds for threats..." (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001: 43). "Attribution of opportunity or threat is an activating mechanism responsible in part for the mobilization of previously inert populations" (McAdam et al. 2001).

The perception of opportunities where threats are objectively strong can give movements surprising successes, or expose them to risks they fail to perceive. An example of the first phenomenon was the revolution against Communist rule in East-Central Europe, when the real breakthrough was not the objective collapse of Communism but the attribution of opportunity across the region, when activists saw that the “early riser” – Poland – was able to challenge state power (Lohmann 1993); an example of the second was when, in the Middle East, activists in country after country attempted to follow the successful example of the Tunisian “Arab Spring,” but eventually succumbed to repression, as in Egypt (Ketchley 2017).

Scholars have identified a number of enduring factors that converge to produce different combinations of opportunity and threat. One set of factors focuses on the strength of the state and its degree of centralization or dispersion; a second deals with states’ prevailing strategies toward challengers and the opportunities it affords them for contention within the system; and a third relates to the choice of contentious performances – how different aspects of a regime affect the forms of collective action that movements employ, especially their practices of repression. We summarize these perspectives in turn.

State strength or dispersion

In its most common form, the state strength argument reasons that centralized states which have effective policy instruments at their command attract collective actors to contest the highest reaches of the state. In contrast, because weak states allow criticism and invite participation, they can deal with most challengers through the institutional political process at every level of the state (Lipsky and Olson 1976). A corollary is that movement actors will gravitate to the sector or level of the state that is most susceptible to their claims (Szymanski 2003).

Different political systems vary in how they process even similar movements. For example, when Kriesi and his collaborators studied “new social movements” in four European states in the 1990s, they found differences in levels of mobilization that corresponded to the strength of the state. Switzerland, which they coded as a “weak” state, had a high level of mobilization and a low level of confrontation; at the other extreme, France, which they coded as a strong state, had a lower level of routine mobilization and a higher level of confrontational protest (Kriesi et al. 1995: 49). The Netherlands and Germany were found to be somewhere in the middle empirically.

Most episodes of contention begin locally, but in systems in which local governments lack autonomy, they gravitate to the summit through processes of scale shift (McAdam and Tarrow 2005). In the mid to late-1960s, student unrest in France gravitated quickly to the national level. In contrast, student protests in the United States remained lodged at the campus level. This meant that while the French student movement eventually attacked the entire system, leading to the dramatic “Events of May” (Touraine 1971), American students targeted university administrators and conservative professors and were unable to form a united student movement until the Vietnam War provided them with a unifying theme.

Opportunities for protest are also structured by regional political cultures and institutions. In his comparison of northern and southern Italy, Tarrow (1967) found that popular movements were channeled into mass parties in the industrial North,

while movements remained inchoate and potentially more violent in the South. In the United States, regional political cultures continued to shape contention even after the end of the Civil War. Although there was racism in both regions, it was only in the South that racial laws shaped party politics, violence, and community into a “Jim Crow” system that was not effectively challenged until the post-World War II period (McAdam 1999).

Federalism also shapes contention: As Anne-Marie Szymanski writes of the American temperance movement, the existence of different state systems allowed the movement to gain leverage at the state level when it was impossible to gain traction in Washington (Szymanski 2003). This channeled the movement to the state level until it was possible – with the passage of the 18th Amendment – to ban alcohol nationally. American federalism segments contention into local, state, and national arenas, where it can be processed, pacified, and resolved through compromise. But not all federal institutions channel contention in peaceful ways; federal systems provide ambitious leaders with institutional resources that they can use to develop independent power bases. For example, it was only in the three federal systems of the Communist world—Czechoslovakia, the USSR, and Yugoslavia – that the downfall of communism led to state breakup and, in the case of Yugoslavia, to civil war (Bunce 1999).

Prevailing state strategies

Researchers have found that different states have different prevailing strategies toward movements. Authoritarian states tend to regard all forms of protest as threats to the regime, while liberal-democratic states tolerate a broad range of peaceful contention and, in fact, often modify their policies in response to protest. But even in authoritarian states, there are important variations, as Chapter 38 in this volume shows. With the fall of the Communist bloc in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, democracy seemed for a time to be “the only game in town.” Even authoritarian leaders played the game of electoral competition. This gave rise to a historically new form of governance – “hybrid authoritarianism” – in which strong leaders manipulated electoral machinery to legitimate their rule (Levitsky and Way 2002).

Regimes, repertoires, and contention

We have seen how different types of states and their prevailing strategies condition movement perceptions of opportunities and threats. But once the decision to engage in collective action is made, how do characteristics of the state affect the types of collective action that groups choose to engage in? Before addressing this question, we need to introduce another key concept – *the repertoire of contention* – and two sub-types of that concept. We define contentious repertoires as arrays of performances that are currently known and available to some set of actors. Contained contention takes place within a regime, using its established institutional routines; transgressive contention challenges those routines and threatens the primacy of those they protect (Tilly and Tarrow 2015: 49, 62). In liberal-democratic regimes, we find a great deal of contention, but most of it is contained within institutions that are designed to structure and pacify conflict. Electoral and legislative institutions are the prime examples.

But even in liberal-democratic systems, movements that want to bring about fundamental change are very likely to use transgressive as well as contained forms of action (Gamson 1990). We can illustrate the difference by turning to two American earlier examples: Although the rhetoric of the Tea Party was full of verbal pyrotechnics, most of its actions were familiar and contained, especially once it had settled on an electoral strategy of challenging the “Republican establishment.” In contrast, albeit softly, the activists of the Occupy movement transgressed routine politics by camping out in public spaces and refusing to move until they were forced to do so by the police.

In authoritarian regimes, there is much less open contention because of the risk of repression, but when contention does arise, it takes largely transgressive forms because the regime regards most forms of expression as dangerous. (But see Chapter 38 in this volume and Moss 2014, for a nuanced empirically-based discussion of this point.) In particular, authoritarian rulers regard organized contention as especially dangerous because it can spread. For example, the Chinese state has a repertoire of tools designed to absorb popular protest before the groups can form organized movements. In response to these risks, Chinese activists have devised innovative tactics such as “disguised collective action” (Fu 2016).

But if all political opportunities and threats were stable, there would be very little change. Yet we know that this is not the case. Below, we shift the focus from enduring features of political systems to variations in and changes of political opportunity and their effects on the ebb and flow of movements. Because much of the literature revolves around both variation and change, we draw selectively both on our own work and on the work of the numerous scholars whose research grows out of a basic interest in the reciprocal relations between opportunities and threats and political contention.

Changes in Opportunity and the Ebb and Flow of Movements

While many scholars have focused on how the stable features of institutionalized political systems affect movement activity, as we noted above, the earliest work on political context by authors like Lipsky, Eisinger, Tilly, and others, stressed the powerful impact of changes in, and variable aspects of, political opportunity and threat. Indeed, virtually all of the early proponents of what would come to be known as the political process perspective saw the timing and ultimate fate of movements, and/or protest, as powerfully conditioned by the variable opportunities afforded challengers by the shifting alliance structure, ideological disposition, and instrumental calculus of those in power. Reflecting the influence of these early works, changes in opportunity quickly became a staple of social movement theory and were used to account for the emergence and development of movements as diverse as the American women’s movement (Costain 1992), liberation theology (Smith 1991), the anti-nuclear movement (Meyer 1993), farm worker mobilization in California (Jenkins 1985), and new social movement activity in Germany (Koopmans 1993, 1995), to name just a few early examples. Moreover, the rate at which new cases are offered in support of the general argument shows no signs of abating. Recent examples of work in this tradition would include: Brockett’s (2005) comparative analysis of

political movements in Central America, Karapın's (2007) study of "movements on the left and right in Germany since the 1960s," Steil and Vasi's (2014) comparative analysis of local pro-immigrant reform efforts in the USA between 2000 and 2011, and Jenkins, Jacobs, and Agnone's (2003: 277) systematic empirical account of the predictive relationship between political opportunities and "the frequency of African-American protest between 1948 and 1997."

As the emphasis on political context has grown, scholars of contention have offered many creative variations on the original model. For example, while nuancing McAdam's (1982, 1999) account of President Truman's advocacy of civil rights reform, Bloom's (2015) work is consistent with the central thrust of the political opportunity perspective, as is Felix Kolb's (2007) reinterpretation of the great victories of the civil rights struggle in the postwar period. In a string of publications, Amenta and collaborators have developed a compatible, if distinctive, "political mediation" model of the relationship between movements and political context (Amenta 2005; Amenta, Carruthers, and Zylan 1992; Amenta, Dunleavy, and Bernstein 1994; Amenta, Halfmann, and Young 1999). Finally, in his two book-length studies of "protest waves" in El Salvador, Almeida (2003, 2008) stressed the complex interplay of variable opportunities and threats in shaping the dynamics of contention.

Sources of change in political opportunities and threats

If political opportunities (and threats) can expand and contract, what are the principal sources of these fluctuations? Perhaps the two major sources of variable political opportunities and threats are changes in the composition of institutional actors and the force of destabilizing events on political context.

Changes in the Composition or Alignment of Institutional Actors

Earlier, we sketched five enduring sources of political opportunities and threats. Changes in these variables often alter perceptions of opportunities and threats helping to catalyze individual movements or broader cycles of contention.

1. *Openness or closure to new actors:* New actors often enter the polity through changes in class structure or immigration, but more often through the suffrage. In 1911, the Italian electoral law was revised to allow almost all male citizens to vote. When this reform was implemented in 1919, following a war that had been disastrous for the Italian economy and for the legitimacy of the elite, it opened the gates to Benito Mussolini's fascist movement, which was able to come to power a mere two years later (Tarrow 2015: Chapter 4). Conversely, when Mussolini's government closed down the electoral process after 1926 and arrested many of his political enemies, opposition movements were forced underground or into exile, not to return until World War II opened new opportunities for an armed Resistance movement.
2. *Stability or instability of political alignments:* Stable political alignments are unlikely to leave much space for insurgencies against the existing party system, which was the case for most of America's history, with a few notable exceptions. For example, in the 1850s, the decline of the Whigs and the splits among the

Democrats opened space for two movements – the Abolitionists and the Free Soil Party – to come together in a new movement-party, the Republican Party, which elected a little-known mid-western lawyer, Abraham Lincoln, as President in 1860 (Tarrow 2015: Chapter 3). Similarly, in the 1960s the embrace of civil rights reform, first reluctantly under President Kennedy, and later more aggressively by Lyndon Johnson, fractured the New Deal coalition, setting in motion a process of sustained racial and regional realignment that brought to a close the preceding period of Democratic dominance and ushered in the rise of an increasingly influential and conservative GOP (McAdam and Kloos 2014).

3. *Influential allies or supporters*: A polity is often seen as made up of “insiders,” who run the system and “outsiders,” who hammer at its gates to gain entry. But this leaves out a band of intermediate actors who straddle the boundaries of institutional politics, or who reach out from within the system to challengers whose goals they embrace or hope to advantage (Tarrow 2012; Tilly 1978). This was the case of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party in the 1930s, which passed the Wagner Act to empower previously excluded trade unions. As a result, the AFL and the CIO became part of what came to be called “the New Deal coalition,” which governed American national politics until the 1960s. Conversely, the Taft-Hartley Act, passed in 1947 by a newly-elected Republican majority in Congress, prohibited some union activities, such as sympathy strikes, secondary boycotts, and discrimination against non-union members, and required union officers to take an oath that they were not communists. The result was a weakening of the American labor movement from which it has never recovered.
4. *Changes in repression or facilitation*: Repression we define as the attempt by a regime or its agents to end movement challenges through physical control. But repression is only one form on a spectrum of modes of social control, some of which aim to slow down or paralyze protest tactics, while others attempt to demobilize dissent by removing the resources for future action. Jules Boykoff (2007: 36) has studied various forms of social control, ranging from legal prosecution, employment discrimination, hearings, surveillance, infiltration, and other forms of harassment to direct violence against demonstrators. Jennifer Earl (2003) has classified protest control into 12 different forms, based on variations in the links between state agents and national elites, which combine (1) the identity of the actor engaging in protest; (2) the links between state agents and national elites; and (3) the form of protest control, ranging from military coercion to legal and financial pressure. Earl’s own work shows that we cannot reduce the potential or actual threats to protesters to the overt use of police violence against them and that even states which have predominantly “soft” prevailing strategies sometimes use violence against those they consider a threat to public order.

As Tilly noted long ago in 1978, repression/facilitation are parts of the prevailing strategies of a regime toward protesters, but they vary across social and political sectors and over time. Regimes’ facilitation or repression varies between social and political sectors in response to elites’ hopes or fears that groups will either support or undermine their power. The most glaring variation in American history is the manipulation of the electoral machinery to favor some groups – for example, rural voters who are overrepresented in most state legislatures – or disfavor others, for example, African-Americans,

both during the Jim Crow era and more recently. Political repression also varies over time, both as a result of which party or ruling group is in power or in response to the changing political climate and to destabilizing events, to which we now turn.

Destabilizing events

What kinds of events tend to destabilize political systems in ways that expand or contract opportunities for, or threats to, movement groups? There is no simple answer to the question. As McAdam noted: “A finite list of specific causes would be impossible to compile ... *any* event or broad social process that serves to undermine the calculations and assumptions on which the political establishment is structured occasions a shift in political opportunities” (1982: 41; emphasis in original). He did, however, identify a smaller subset of events that he describes as especially “likely to prove disruptive of the political status quo.” We take up what we see as the two most important of those identified by McAdam: *war* and *economic crises*. While wars profoundly close off the opportunities for contention, as governments curtail rights and citizens “rally round the flag,” and economic crises remove resources from citizens, both war and economic crises have variable effects on both the formation and the character of social movements.

War and movements

James Madison long ago warned that war curtails rights, and for this reason, counselled against the creation of a standing army against his political opponent, Alexander Hamilton. As Madison warned, “Of all the enemies to public liberty, war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germ of every other” (1985: 491–492). As historian Porter found, “A government at war is a juggernaut of centralization determined to crush any internal opposition that impedes the mobilization of militarily vital resources” (1994: xv). Such warnings led legal theorist Scheppele (2006) to argue that modern warfare creates incentives for states to “put people in their place” – that is, to prevent them from protesting. The American Civil War and the two World Wars led to heavy restrictions of rights – especially of groups that were suspected of disloyalty to the regime (Tarrow 2015).

Yet wars have also triggered episodes of contentious politics, first, against the extraction of taxes and the forced quartering of soldiers, then against the draft and the scarcity of food for the civilian population, then against the regime as a whole, as in the Russian Revolution, and, finally, in movements against war itself and in favor of peace (Cortright 2014; Meyer 1993). Moreover, in war’s wake, citizen groups of all kinds have profited from state weakening and from newfound militancy to demand new or expanded rights. It was in response to wartime sacrifices that women were granted the suffrage after World War I, that the GI Bill of Rights was passed at the end of World War II, and that 18-year-olds were given the vote during the Vietnam War (Mettler 2004).

Economic crises

Similarly, economic crises have contradictory effects on contentious politics. On the one hand, during economic crises, there is less demand for labor, leading to layoffs and the weakening of the bargaining power of unions. But as grievances

grow and governments respond to the crisis with austerity programs, mobilization often grows among both workers and others, as we have seen during the Great Recession in both Europe and the United States (Bermeo and Bartels 2014). The latest crisis in the western economies, touched off by the collapse of the American financial sector in 2008, created new insurgent movements in Spain, Portugal, Greece, and the United States, both on the radical Left and on the populist Right (della Porta 2015).

Reciprocal effects of opportunities and institutions

Up to this point we have focused exclusively on the ways in which various kinds of facilitative changes or ruptures in systems of institutional politics may stimulate movement emergence or growth. But the relationship between these variables is reciprocal. If changes in political opportunities shape the prospects for movement emergence or success, the reverse is true as well (Tilly 2006). That is, once they are mobilized, movements have the capacity to reshape or modify the systems of institutional power within which they are embedded.

The volume of work on the topic of “movement outcomes” is now so large as to preclude an exhaustive summary. Fortunately, the chapters in this volume (see Part V in this volume) devoted to the topic spare us the need to systematically summarize this body of scholarship. Still, we see a selective review of some of the more influential works in this tradition as appropriate. Two movements in particular show how profound the effects of social movements have been on American political institutions: the civil rights movement and the women’s movement.

With respect to civil rights, Andrews (1997, 2001, 2004) has carefully assessed the variable impact of the civil rights movement on a number of institutional outcomes (e.g. voter registration rates, number of black elected officials, size of anti-poverty programs) in Mississippi; Luders (2010) fashions a general “cost-assessment” theory of movement outcomes that looks, not at the decisions of government officials, but at economic actors; and Gillion (2013) goes beyond the usual focus on the signature legislative gains of the civil rights struggle to consider the movement’s effect on judicial and presidential outcomes.

With respect to the women’s movement, Banaszak (1996) has identified key factors that shaped the variable impact of the US women’s suffrage movement over time, showing how this movement affected electoral institutions and outcomes; McCammon et al. (2001) assess the long, protracted, but ultimately successful effort of the women’s suffrage movement to secure the franchise; Clemens (1997) demonstrated the impact of innovative women’s movement organizing on the structure of interest group politics; and Katzenstein (1998) shows the profound impact of feminism on two unlikely institutions: the armed forces and the Catholic Church.

More generally, McAdam and Kloos (2014) attribute the deep divisions in contemporary American society – political, economic and racial – to the centrifugal force of a series of movements, first, on the left in the 1960s, and since then mostly on the right, in a process of “asymmetric polarization.” These movements have fundamentally changed the “racial and regional geography” of American politics and pushed both parties off center and toward their respective ideological margins.

In general, American politics has been shaped throughout its history by an ongoing tug-of-war between movements, parties, and government institutions.

Repertoires of contention are not only shaped by regimes and institutions; over the long run, they shape them as well. For example, the strike, which was at first a transgressive form of collective action, eventually became a contained form of contention guided by legislation, habit, and routine interactions (Tarrow 2011). The same is true for other contained forms, like marching on Washington, a practice which descended from a spontaneous demonstration by the “Bonus Army” demanding bonuses for service in World War I, before being adopted in the civil rights demonstrations of the 1960s (Tilly and Tarrow 2015: 51–52). Eventually, marching on – or in – Washington became a routine way of demonstrating a movement’s strength and determination.

But as contained forms of contention continue to dominate within American politics, a “forbidden” form – terrorism – has diffused dangerously around the world (see Chapter 37 in this volume). This has had profound effects on aspects of the American state, ranging from the merely annoying – i.e. security checks at airports – to ones that threaten civil liberties and human rights – e.g. the use of secret courts and the infiltration of privacy. Whether these changes are producing a “Schmittian” involution in the United States (Agamben 2005) or merely a shift in the balance of “infrastructural power” toward the government (Tarrow 2015) remains to be seen. What is certain is that violent contention in the form of terrorism is having a profound effect on institutional politics.

Critiques and Extensions

In his article in the *American Sociological Review*, Bloom wrote that “political opportunity theory has proven extremely generative” (2015: 391) in alerting movement scholars to the importance of political context and the variable vulnerability of regimes to insurgent challenge. That said, the theory has also been “generative” of critiques of various aspects of the perspective as well as a host of extensions and permutations of the general framework. Here we review what we see as the most significant criticisms – structural bias, indifference to non-state targets, and overemphasis on opportunity over threat – before adding one of our own – a “movement-centric bias” – and then turning to some of the theoretical “extensions” we see producing a new and improved conceptual perspective on the political contexts of contention.

Structural bias

The earliest and perhaps most common critique of the political process perspective focused on what was seen as the “structural bias” reflected in much of the work in this tradition (Bloom 2015; Goodwin and Jasper 1999; Joppke 1993; McAdam 1999: xi; Polletta 1999). Too often, according to critics, political opportunities were treated as objective features of political contexts that virtually compel movement action in a kind of deterministic response to environmental stimulus. While agreeing

with this critique, it should be clear that the bias is not inherent in the model. As Kriesi (2004: 77–78) noted in his chapter on “political context and opportunity” in the first edition of this *Companion*:

Nothing in the general approach [is inherently deterministic] ... Thus the earliest version of the political process model—McAdam’s (1982: 48–51) account of the civil rights movement—was already very much aware of the subjective elements mediating between opportunity and action ... and he, at the time, criticized the proponents of both the classic and resource mobilization perspectives for ignoring [interpretive processes].

If not inherent in the theory, however, the distinction between objective political conditions and their subjective interpretation was missing from much of the work that the model inspired. Perceived and socially constructed opportunities gave way in later work to “political opportunity structures” (POS) and, with this shift in emphasis, what had originally been conceived of as an interpretive account of movement emergence – albeit with structural stimuli – had morphed into a structurally determinist one. What rightly troubled the critics was the implicit claim that objective shifts in the ruling party, institutional rules, or some other dimension of the “political opportunity structure,” virtually *compel* mobilization. This, as they were wont to point out, is a structuralist conceit that fails to grant to collective meaning-making its central role in social life.

The good news is that the structural determinist applications of political process theory have largely given way to more processual, interpretive formulations. With the theory’s emphasis on the ongoing interaction of movement and state actors within a shifting and necessarily constructed political context, research in the “political mediation” tradition clearly conforms to the latter framework. More importantly, without invoking any specific theory, the best recent work in the field also suggests adherence to this more interpretive, interactive conception of political context and movement dynamics.

Recent works help to make our point. In her 2012 book, *The U.S. Women’s Jury Movement and Strategic Adaptation*, comparing the development and impact of the movement in 15 states over time, McCammon argues that progress was fastest in those states where activists showed the greatest skill at reading and responding to the shifting political and cultural “exigencies” confronting them. Similarly, in their comparative study of variation in the level of “transgressive protest” directed at corporate, educational, and other institutional targets, Walker, Martin, and McCarthy (2008) offer a similarly dynamic, interpretive, account of their findings. Just as the strategic responses of McCammon’s activists reflected their evolving understanding of the targets of their actions, Walker et al. see the specific repertoires deployed by the movements as reflecting a sophisticated understanding of each target’s vulnerabilities and its capacities – or lack thereof – to respond to movement tactics.

Indifference to non-state targets

A second critique of the political process perspective on context challenges the theory’s preoccupation with formal state institutions and actors as the central targets of movement activities. While no doubt germane to many conflicts, contexts other than

institutionalized systems of state authority are relevant to an understanding of movements. This was the key point in Snow's (2004) article on movements as challenges to authority. While other authors had voiced this criticism before, no one did so in as much detail as Armstrong and Bernstein in their 2008 article in *Sociological Theory*. Moreover, they deployed their critique in the service of an alternative perspective, what they term "a multi-institutional politics approach to social movements." The central insight of the perspective is straightforward: the wide variety of movements that we encounter in the contemporary world aim at a far more varied set of targets and institutional contexts than suggested by the state-centered version of the political process model.

Armstrong and Bernstein make a good case: By privileging political movements over all others, proponents of the political process perspective unwittingly have marginalized other targets and indeed, other types of movements, within the field of social movement studies. Happily, the impact of this second line of critique is inspiring research on a much broader array of movements and targets. The Walker et al. (2008) article on the determinants of movement tactics against corporate and educational targets is only one example of the broadening of empirical work in the field. But it also fits with what is almost certainly the single most prominent line of new work to emerge in the last decade or so. We refer to research that looks at movements that target corporate or other economic actors.

The list of works in this area includes Ingram, Yue, Rao's (2010) analysis of the dynamics of strategic interaction between company officials and anti-Walmart activists; King's (2008a, 2008b) work on both stakeholder activism and its impact on the factors that shape the way corporations respond to movements that target them; Raeburn's (2004) detailed account of lesbian and gay challenges to corporate workplace practices; Schurman and Munro's (2010) book on the dynamics of contention shaping the growing conflict between agribusiness and their varied movement opponents; and Soule's 2009 book, *Contention and Corporate Social Responsibility*. But as we will argue below, this new strand of work on contention against non-state targets can profit from engagement with the political process perspective.

Threat and opportunity

In *From Mobilization to Revolution*, Tilly (1978) assigned equal weight to threat and opportunity as catalysts of emergent collective action. The other early proponents of the political process approach, however, generally downplayed the causal significance of threat in deference to a singular preoccupation with expanding political opportunities (see Chapter 2 by Almeida in this volume, on the importance of threats). McAdam (1982), for example, made no mention of threat in his formal explication of the model. This led to a third important critique of the political process perspective, the failure to grant any real significance to the role of perceived threats, as opposed to opportunities, in the genesis of emergent collective action. This lacuna made it difficult for the early proponents of the perspective to understand whole categories of movements, from ethnic conflict triggered by fears of economic and political competition from other racial/ethnic groups to the wide array of reactive movements that arise in response to "suddenly imposed grievances" (Walsh and Warland 1983) or other perceived NIMBY-style threats (Snow et al. 1998).

The stress on opportunity also did not square with the inconsistent findings regarding the relationship between repression and collective action. If we think of repression as the contraction of opportunities, then an increase in repression should typically lead to lower levels of protest or other forms of collective action. We know, however, from the extensive empirical literature on repression, that this is not always the case. Even controlling for other factors, repression often presages higher levels of insurgent action (Khawaja 1993; Olivier 1991; Rasler 1996). If we think of repression as a form of threat, the failure to assign equal predictive significance to threat and opportunity becomes all the more apparent. Today scholars of contention are apt to see movements as shaped by a complex mix of perceived threats and opportunities, as would-be insurgents seek to make sense of the political and other contexts in which they are embedded.

Ongoing empirical work on repression continues to yield findings that speak to the significance of both threat and opportunity as catalysts of protest (Earl 2003). Scholars of ethnic conflict and violence continue to adduce evidence consistent with competition theory's emphasis on perceived economic and political threats in the genesis of contention (Olzak 2006). And reactive, NIMBY-style, collective action against all manner of perceived threats, remains perhaps the single most common type of protest world-wide. Adding to this, the large number of recent studies that assign principal causal significance to the role of perceived threat in the origin of a movement affords a sense of how analytically central threat has become to the study of contention. A remarkable example in this regard will serve to make the point: Maher's (2010) study of "threat, resistance, and collective action" in the three Nazi death camps of Sobibor, Treblinka, and Auschwitz. Another is Einwohner's (2006) work on Jewish resistance in the Warsaw ghetto.

A movement-centric bias

To these three critiques of the political process perspective we add one of our own. We worry that, relative to the "early days," the field is now far more "movement-centric" and less focused on the relationship between movement and context, even as the field has grown exponentially since its modest beginnings in the 1970s and the 1980s. The absence of a recognized field of social movement studies, circa 1970, forced those scholars whose works defined the emerging field to read widely and frame their work for much broader audiences. Some situated their work within the literature on political economy (Paige 1975; Piven and Cloward 1977; Schwartz 1976; Skocpol 1979); still others within organizational studies (McCarthy and Zald (1973, 1977); and others in world systems theory (Arrighi, Hopkins, and Wallerstein 1989). For their part, those who shaped the emerging political process perspective were in dialogue with colleagues in political science and political sociology (Eisinger 1973; McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1983; Tilly 1978). These scholars simply did not have the luxury of framing their work in terms of a very specific body of social movement theory and research.

As the field developed, however, it quickly grew sufficiently large as to serve as its own primary audience, allowing it to become increasingly insular and self-referential in the process. As Walder observed in his 2009 critical review of the field, social movement scholarship is now squarely – and narrowly – focused on mobilization, on

those who mobilize, and in general, on internal movement dynamics. An examination of the index of the first edition of *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* affords a telling reflection of the narrowness that has come to characterize social movement studies. (But note the section entitled “Thematic Intersections in the current edition of this book.”)

Consider the following list of index entries that reflect a broader *contextual* understanding of movements:

- Capitalism/capital – 5 pages;
- Economic instability – 2 pages;
- Elections/electoral systems – 6 pages;
- Political parties – 4 pages;
- State(s)/state breakdown – 49 pages;
- World economy – 2 pages;
- World system theory – 8 pages.

With the exception of “state(s)/state breakdown,” the listings for these contextual topics are somewhat meager. If, at the outset, the field was substantially concerned with understanding movements in macro-political and economic context, this broader “external” focus has atrophied considerably. Contrast the paltry numbers reported above with the large number of listings for the following set of movement-centric topics:

- Collective identity – 47 pages;
- Emotions – 30 pages;
- Framing/frames – 96 pages;
- Mobilization – 75 pages;
- Social movement organization – 48 pages;
- Tactics/tactical repertoires – 39 pages.

We want to be clear about our argument. There is *nothing* wrong with the focus on internal movement dynamics. Forty years of scholarship on social movements have yielded great gains in our understanding of this most important form of purposive collective action. Our concern is with the balance and interaction between this *internal* focus on movement dynamics and how these movements relate to, engage with, are born of and often modify the *external* political, economic, cultural, and legal contexts in which they are embedded. In the next section we examine two growing areas of interest that connect movements with crucial interlocutors – courts and political parties.

Extensions and combinations

If there have been serious and constructive criticisms of the approach we have just described, there have also been creative extensions and combinations. We illustrate this with two extensions – the relations of movements to courts and parties – and with one major combination – the linkages between economic factors and the political process.

Movements and elections

Elections offer opportunities for contention in both liberal-democratic and authoritarian regimes. As we have argued elsewhere (McAdam and Tarrow 2013), movements can transfer their activism to support friendly parties in elections, as the American trade unions have done since the 1930s. This was the pattern of the Tea Party movement, which arose as a grassroots and “astroturf” movement in 2010 and transferred its activism to the Republican Party (Skocpol and Williamson 2011). Movements can also react to disputed elections that they oppose, sometimes leading to “electoral revolutions,” as occurred in the Balkans and in the Caucasus (Bunce and Wolchik 2011). Movements can also bring about changes in parties’ electoral fortunes. Think of the election of Lincoln in 1860 and of Roosevelt in 1932, or the impact of the anti-Vietnam War movement on the elections of 1968 and 1972; they were mainly the result of the intrusion of movements into the party system.

Movements can force parties to shift to the extremes in order to satisfy their demands (McAdam and Kloos 2014). They can also become parties themselves, as the Green movement did in Germany in the 1980s, becoming an institutionalized part of the party system. Such transformations often lead to the co-option of movement leaders as they enter parliaments, as Michels (1962) long ago predicted, but often have profound effects on the system as a whole, as the recent appearance of insurgent anti-institutional parties has done in Greece, Italy, and Spain (della Porta 2015).

Movements and the courts

Another set of institutions – legal institutions – have only recently come to the attention of social movement scholars. (See Chapter 17 by Boutcher and McCammon in this volume.) Legal scholars are rapidly coming to appreciate that social movements drive much legal change (Balkin 2011; Cole 2016; Edelman, Leachman, and McAdam 2010; McCann 1994), although the verdict is not unanimous (Rosenberg 2008). But our theoretical understanding of the relationship among law and social movements remains one-sided. In particular, little is known about the dynamics by which changes in law and lawmaking translate into changes in advocacy tactics and about the reciprocal relations between movements and legal institutions in these changes.

Ever since the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* came down from the United States Supreme Court in 1954, legal scholars have been acutely aware of the impact of court decisions on social change. But what has been less clearly recognized are the complicated relations between social movement organizations and legal change. While it is true that it was a movement organization – the NAACP – that brought the case against the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, less clear is the role of movements in the implementation – or *non*-implementation – of that decision. While some scholars have seen the Brown case as revolutionary, others have cast doubt on its long-term impact. One scholar even labeled the aspiration to bring about racial justice through the courts *A Hollow Hope* (Rosenberg 2008), pointing out accurately how effectively the decision was dismantled by state authorities in the white-dominated South.

How then was racial justice achieved in the wake of the *Brown* decision? To understand this outcome, we need to turn from the courts and the legislatures back to social movements. For it was not the original court-centered mobilization by the NAACP that brought about racial justice but the far more transgressive protests of

the sit-ins and other forms of direct action in the early 1960s that forced federal officials to intervene in the South and compelled the many instances of school integration that the courts had been unable or unwilling to enforce (Klarman 2004).

In both the relations between movements and parties and in legal mobilization on behalf of civil rights, the movement-centeredness we criticized in the last section would only take us so far; but neither could a sole attention to political institutions: it is in the reciprocal relations between public institutions and social movements that social progress was made in both areas; which takes us to our concluding remarks.

Combinations and permutations

We argued earlier against a “movement-centric” approach to contentious politics, and would be untrue to our expansive approach if we did not recognize that “politics isn’t everything.” Take the emphasis on protests against non-state targets that we sketched in the last section, drawing on the work of Snow and others. Such an emphasis developed in the context of a critique of political process theory (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008), but it can also usefully be *combined with* that approach. For example, are anti-corporate movements more likely to emerge or be more successful under progressive governments than under corporate-friendly ones? Do non-state-targeting movements grow out of broader cycles of contention that initially target the state? And how do the goals of businesses and movements mesh, as we saw in the current coalition of privacy groups and tech businesses against the government’s campaign to force Apple to open its iPhones to surveillance? Linking challenges to non-state actors with changes in the political context may well be the next step in the expansion of the political process approach.

More broadly, how are changes in the economic system processed through contentious politics? Every economy in the West was stricken by the economic crisis that was touched off in the United States in 2008, but they did not all respond in the same ways. Some countries – like Canada – barely saw the rise of anti-austerity movements; some – like the United States – saw the near-simultaneous rise of a leftist and rightist populist movements; some – like Ireland and Iceland – saw immediate, but rapidly declining protests against their governments’ financial manipulations; while others – like Greece and Spain – have been profoundly roiled by new leftist movements that have shifted the alignments of their party systems.

Despite the appearance of politically-sensitive comparative accounts of the Great Recession by political scientists and sociologists (Bermeo and Bartels 2014; della Porta 2015), we still lack a comparative analysis of the effects of economic crisis that combines economic variables with the political process. “Bringing capitalism back in” and combining it with the political processing of economic crisis and revival may well be the next important step in the study of the political context of social movements.

Conclusion

We have been charged in this chapter with reviewing work on the “political contexts” of social movements. Our interest in movements has always been, first and foremost, motivated by the conviction that the dynamic, reciprocal relationship

between movements and systems of institutionalized politics is among the most consequential forces of social and political change in society. This is true whether we examine enduring institutional sources of opportunity and threat, as we did in the first section, or their changing and variable sources, as we have done in the second section. The critiques and self-critiques in the third section were serious enough to produce revisions and permutations in the original theory and will – we hope – lead future scholars to learn from them in a positive fashion. The extensions of political process theory we have highlighted show that the promise of the study of political contexts of movements lies in examining their reciprocal relations with and within institutions.

We close with a confession and heartfelt celebration of the field of social movement studies. Even as we salute the broad, pioneering works that helped give birth to the field, we would be the first to admit that the best social movement scholarship today is far more sophisticated, both theoretically and methodologically, than the “classic” works in the political process tradition. Even as we decry the movement-centric bias we worry about, we have no trouble pointing to countless recent works that reflect the concern with context and the balance between “internal” and “external” foci that we are advocating here. Still, we would be remiss if, in bringing the chapter to a close, we did not urge the field, as a whole, to be mindful of the movement-centric narrowness that too often characterizes the field and to look for ways to redress the narrowness by taking context – of all kinds – more seriously.

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