
Mini-Symposium: Social Movements

Caught in a Winding, Snarling Vine: The Structural Bias of Political Process Theory

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The study of social movements has recently been energized by an explosion of work that emphasizes “political opportunities”—a concept meant to come to grips with the complex environments that movements face. In the excitement over this new metaphor, there has been a tendency to stretch it to cover a wide variety of empirical phenomena and causal mechanisms. A strong structural bias is also apparent in the way that political opportunities are understood and in the selection of cases for study. Even those factors adduced to correct some of the problems of the political opportunity approach—such as “mobilizing structures” and “cultural framing”—are subject to the same structural distortions. We recommend social movement analysis that rejects invariant modeling, is wary of conceptual stretching, and recognizes the diverse ways that culture and agency, including emotions and strategizing, shape collective action.

KEY WORDS: social movements; political process; political opportunity; social networks; culture; emotions.

The employment of invariant models . . . assumes a political world in which whole structures and sequences repeat themselves time after time in essentially the same form. That would be a convenient world for theorists, but it does not exist.

—Charles Tilly (1995:1596)

The symbols of social order—the police, the bugle calls in the barracks, military parades and waving flags—are at once and the same time inhibitory and stimulating:

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for they do not convey the message “Don’t dare to budge”; they cry out “Get ready to attack.”

—Frantz Fanon (1986:45)

One of the exciting developments in recent research on social movements has been extensive conceptualization of the political environments that movements face, which has largely taken the form of “political opportunity” or “political process” approaches. Thanks to the prolific efforts of senior scholars such as Bert Klandermans, Hanspeter Kriesi, Doug McAdam, John McCarthy, Sidney Tarrow, Charles Tilly, and Mayer Zald, political process theory (hereafter, PPT) is currently the hegemonic paradigm among social movement analysts.⁴ A younger generation of scholars—including Edwin Amenta, Elisabeth Clemens, Marco Giugni, Ruud Koopmans, David Meyer, Cathy Schneider, Christian Smith, and Suzanne Staggborg, to name a few—has now taken up aspects of PPT, the most telling sign of a “hot” paradigm. Although not all scholars deploy its concepts, PPT dominates the field of social movement research by powerfully shaping its conceptual landscape, theoretical discourse, and research agenda. Scholars from other theoretical camps cannot help but sit up and take notice. PPT may be criticized, but it cannot be ignored.

The weaknesses that we see in PPT derive from the same sources as its popularity, especially a strong bias in favor of metaphors of “structure.” Despite its vast influence, moreover, PPT remains conceptually muddled insofar as political process theorists have been unable to reach agreement about the definitions of its basic concepts. This imprecision has allowed PPT to be applied in diverse settings, but it has hindered the testing and refinement of theoretical propositions. It sometimes seems as if there were as many political process approaches as theorists. The apparent rigor of labeling something a political opportunity “structure” may help to explain why so many causal variables and mechanisms have been analyzed under this rubric.

We also argue that two of the most influential strands of PPT—what we call the *political opportunity thesis* and the *political process model*—are (depending on how they are understood) tautological, trivial, inadequate, or just plain wrong. At best, PPT in its current form provides a helpful albeit limited set of “sensitizing concepts” for social movement research. It does not provide what it frequently and often implicitly promises: a causally adequate universal theory or “model” of social movements. Such an invariant and transhistorical theory is simply not possible and should,

⁴The concept of “political process” was popularized by Doug McAdam’s (1982) book on the black protest movement in the United States, although, as McAdam notes (1982:36), he took the term from an article by Rule and Tilly (1975).

therefore, not be the goal of research (see Tilly, 1994, 1995). However, PPT's language of causal structures encourages such ambitions.

The bias lurking beneath these problems is that "structural" factors (i.e., factors that are relatively stable over time and outside the control of movement actors) are seen and emphasized more readily than others—and nonstructural factors are often analyzed as though they were structural factors. We shall identify the results of this bias in several places. Although the original term "political opportunity structure" (POS) has generally given way to apparently more fluid concepts such as "process" and "opportunities," these are still usually interpreted in unnecessarily structural ways.

A number of factors have been added to political opportunities in recognition of the influence of nonstructural variables—but without being accurately theorized as nonstructural. These include strategy and agency, which have to do with the active choices and efforts of movement actors as well as of their opponents and other players in the conflict, and cultural factors that deal with the moral visions, cognitive understandings, and emotions that exist prior to a movement but which are also transformed by it. Process theorists tend to wash the meaning and fluidity out of strategy, agency, and culture so that they will look more like structures. The two main categories that process theorists have added to political opportunities are "mobilizing structures," which contain much that is not structural, and "framing," which is their effort to include culture, but actually leaves out most of culture. This bias is especially clear in the volume *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements* (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 1996a), a programmatic statement intended to establish some conceptual consensus among those following this approach.

We write as sympathetic critics of PPT, impressed by the quantity and quality of empirical research that has been carried out in its name. We have used kindred concepts in our own work (Jasper, 1990; Goodwin, 1999). Because we do not believe that an invariant model of social movements is possible, we do not pretend to offer another, "better" model than those proposed by political process theorists, but rather a more expansive set of concepts and distinctions for the analysis of social movements. Most of our critical remarks about PPT, finally, can be found in the work of political process theorists themselves, especially McAdam and Tilly. However, these criticisms have not had the radical impact on PPT that they require. They have not resulted, above all, either in the abandonment of the chimerical quest for an invariant general theory or model of social movements or in the eradication of PPT's structural bias.

Not all political process theorists view general theory as their goal; instead, some explore how the organizational forms, repertoires, and consequences of social movements are shaped contingently by historically shifting

constellations of political processes (see, e.g., Kriesi *et al.*, 1995; Kriesi, 1996; Rucht, 1996). Many, however, especially when discussing the emergence of social movements (as opposed to their forms, strategies, and impact), remain enamored of sweeping, transhistorical formulas and invariant models. Others imply such a goal in their language of necessary and sufficient causation.

THE POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY THESIS

The narrow political opportunity thesis claims that *social movements emerge as a result of “expanding” political opportunities*. As Tarrow writes in *Power in Movement* (1994:17–18; also pp. 81, 150), “The main argument of this study is that people join in social movements in response to political opportunities and then, through collective action, create new ones. As a result, the ‘when’ of social movement mobilization—when political opportunities are opening up—goes a long way towards explaining its ‘why.’ . . . [E]ven groups with mild grievances and few internal resources may appear in movement, while those with deep grievances and dense resources—but lacking opportunities—may not.” Tarrow here loosens the narrow thesis by emphasizing that social movements, once they have emerged, can themselves further expand the political opportunities that allegedly gave rise to mobilization in the first place (see also Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996). The passage nonetheless suggests that neither intense grievances nor extensive resources are sufficient *or even necessary* for movement mobilization to occur. Collective-behavior and resource-mobilization theories, in other words, are barking up the wrong trees. What is necessary and, it would seem, virtually sufficient for social movement mobilization to occur—because “groups with mild grievances and few internal resources” can probably be found in any society, at any time—is the “opening up” of *political opportunities*.⁵

Whether this thesis make sense depends, of course, on what is meant by “political opportunities.” The broadest definition makes the thesis tautological: Movements cannot emerge where people are unable, for whatever reason, to associate with one another for political purposes. (Imagine the fictive society described by George Orwell in *1984*.) However, Tarrow defines movements as a form of association, as “*collective challenges by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interaction with*

⁵The concept of “political opportunities” is generally attributed to Peter Eisinger (1973). The more general concept of “opportunity structure” originates with Robert K. Merton (1968:229–232; 1996); ironically, Merton, who is never cited by political opportunity theorists, is a major figure in a theoretical tradition (structural–functionalism) anathema to most political opportunity theorists.

elites, opponents and authorities”—challenges that employ “disruptive direct action against elites, authorities, other groups or cultural codes,” usually in public places (1994:3–4, emphasis in original). A social movement does not simply presuppose, but is itself an expression of the associated activities of some group or field of actors. So if “political opportunities” means something like “the chance for people to act together,” then it is certainly true that social movement mobilization requires political opportunities. Understood in this way, however, the thesis is tautological: political opportunity is built into the definition of a social movement.

Recognizing this, most political opportunity analysts have attempted carefully to disaggregate and operationalize various types of political opportunities or, more usually, a range of variables that cause political opportunities to “expand” or “contract.” Specified in this way, the political opportunity thesis becomes falsifiable, in principle. At just this point, however, political opportunity analysts find themselves on the horns of a definitional dilemma: The more broadly one defines political opportunities, the more trivial (and, ultimately, tautological) the political opportunity thesis becomes; conversely, the more narrowly one defines political opportunities, the more inadequate or implausible the political opportunity thesis becomes as an explanation for the rise of any particular social movement. This definitional dilemma may be a reason for the lack of consensus as to the precise meaning of “political opportunities.”

On one horn of this dilemma, political opportunities can be specified as all those factors or processes that in one way or another affect “the chance to act together”—including processes that we would not normally think of as “political” at all. In this case, however, the political opportunity thesis again approaches tautology or, at best, triviality; any statement that X leads to Y (in our case, expanding political opportunities give rise to social movement mobilization) is not very illuminating when X includes, as it were, everything under the sun. Gamson and Meyer recognize this danger:

The concept of political opportunity is in trouble, in danger of becoming a sponge that soaks up virtually every aspect of the social movement environment—political institutions and culture, crises of various sorts, political alliances, and policy shifts. . . . It threatens to become an all-encompassing fudge factor for all the conditions and circumstances that form the context for collective action. Used to explain so much, it may ultimately explain nothing at all. (1996:275)⁶

Defined this broadly, “political opportunities” explain social movements with the same precision that “social structure,” say, explains criminal behavior. Ironically, Gamson and Meyer themselves define political opportunities

⁶Tarrow (1996:881) similarly complains that “if opportunity structure is allowed to become a catch-all term for any interaction between a group and the state, or if the concept is specified post hoc, then we will end up with ad hoc analyses that border on descriptions.”

in a way that includes political institutions and culture, crises of various sorts, political alliances, and policy shifts, among still other factors (Gamson and Meyer, 1996:281, Figure 12.1). As McAdam notes, “Gamson and Meyer could well be accused of contributing to the very problem they seek to remedy” (1996a:25).

McAdam’s own definition of political opportunities, however, demonstrates the difficulties of the other horn of the dilemma, when the specification of political opportunities is restricted to a short list of “narrowly political factors” (McAdam, 1996a:26). McAdam proposes what he calls a “highly consensual list of dimensions of political opportunity”:

1. The relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system
2. The stability or instability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity
3. The presence or absence of elite allies
4. The state’s capacity and propensity for repression (McAdam, 1996a:27).

However, the other contributors to the same volume in which McAdam’s proposal is made (including Gamson and Meyer) do not restrict themselves to this “consensual” list; they find it necessary to employ additional—and sometimes historically and situationally specific—political opportunity variables to explain the movements that interest them. McAdam’s four variables cannot by themselves explain the rise of these movements—nor could any other specification of political opportunity that is this narrow.

In his analysis of the 1989 revolts in Eastern Europe, for example, Oberschall adds the legitimacy of the state, the international environment, and a number of “short-term events” in that region (including failed reforms from above) as dimensions of political opportunity (1996:94-95). In his analysis of new social movements in Western Europe, Kriesi suggests that a political system’s “informal procedures and prevailing strategies with regard to challengers” must be seen as an important dimension of political opportunity (1996:160; see also Kriesi *et al.*, 1995). Rucht includes the “policy implementation capacity” of the state as yet another dimension of political opportunity in his cross-national study of movement structures (1996:190).

Other recent studies suggest additional dimensions to the political opportunity concept. Costain conceptualizes “independent state action” by “subgroups within government” as a crucial dimension of political opportunity (1992:24). In his study of the U.S. Central America peace movement, Smith (1996:88–108) views as political opportunities such factors as President Reagan’s “preoccupation” with Central America, the “Vietnam Syn-

drome” (i.e., popular opposition to U.S. intervention in Third World conflicts), and a series of White House “policy blunders.” In this extreme case, political opportunities seem to include even the grievances—Reagan’s policies—that inspired the movement’s formation. Thus, analysts of political opportunities conspicuously fail to agree on just what factors to include, with no short list sufficient to explain the actual cases that interest them.

WHAT IS A POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY?

Disagreement over what counts as a political opportunity allows a structural bias to operate subtly and usually inadvertently. For example, McAdam insists that political opportunity variables should only include “structural” factors and not cultural processes: “The kinds of structural changes and power shifts that are most defensibly conceived of as *political* opportunities should not be confused with the collective processes by which these changes are interpreted and framed” (1996a:25–26, emphasis in original).

McAdam’s distinction between political opportunities and people’s perceptions of those opportunities is a case of misplaced concreteness: Culture is recognized but excluded from what really counts (although he elsewhere analyzes “cultural opportunities” [McAdam, 1994:39]). Opportunities may be there even if no one perceives them. McAdam insists that distinguishing culture from political opportunities will allow us to understand interesting cases in which political opportunities do not lead to collective action, and cases in which collective action arises in the absence of favorable opportunities. From a cultural constructionist perspective, however, both of these cases depend on cultural interpretation, regardless of “objective” opportunities. There may be no such thing as objective political opportunities before or beneath interpretation—or at least none that matter; they are all interpreted through cultural filters. Tarrow implicitly recognizes this by defining political opportunities as those “dimensions of the political environment that provide *incentives* for people to undertake collective action by affecting their *expectations* for success or failure” (1994:85, our emphasis). Incentives and expectations necessarily involve interpretation.

In the volume edited by McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996a), Gamson and Meyer present an alternative to the editors’ framework, one that recognizes how completely culture penetrates institutions and political processes. The distinction between the two becomes analytic, not concrete. Although this cultural constructionism has been adopted by increasing numbers of social movement scholars, especially Gamson, the editors of this volume do not treat it seriously. Furthermore, the idea of political

opportunities as “structural changes and power shifts” suggests that structures are not so fixed as the word normally implies. How often do they change, and under what conditions? Can movements affect them? As with past formulations, McAdam’s has a structural bias, confounding relatively fixed aspects of a polity (constitutions, electoral systems) with constantly (or potentially) shifting strategic alliances and choices. McAdam wants to deal with the latter, but treats them as though they were the former. For example, McAdam’s fourth dimension of political opportunity collapses the actual use of repression, which is a strategic choice, into structural capacities for repression, which are more a matter of physical and human resources. The conflation of physical capacities and their use reveals the same structural bias as that between willingness and opportunity: people’s intentions, choices, and discretion disappear in a mechanical play of structures (Jasper, 1997). Analysts do not ask why some people become inclined to protest, or why some states use their repressive capacities. The United States federal government certainly has far more repressive capacity now than 100 years ago, but it is actually less likely to send troops to massacre striking trade unionists.

A structural sensibility pervades not only what is seen as a political opportunity and how it is analyzed, but also the choice of movements to be studied. Most process theorists have tested their theories on movements pursuing political participation or rights, notably the labor and civil rights movements—what Jasper (1997) calls “citizenship movements.” McAdam (1982:25, our emphasis) even *defines* social movements as “those organized efforts, *on the part of excluded groups*, to promote or resist changes in the structure of society that involve recourse to noninstitutional forms of political participation.” Assuming he means legal or political exclusion, this definition focuses attention on protestors’ interactions with the state, and those movements or activities that challenge existing laws, state policies, or states as such. Ignored are movements populated by the middle class, especially those that challenge extant “cultural codes.” Not only cultural movements but also any movements that do not target the state as their main opponent are poorly served by political process models. Jasper and Poulsen (1993) showed that only state-oriented movements, especially movements of oppressed groups, face the regular, automatic repression that process models assume. Movements of those with full citizenship rights, especially many of the so-called new social movements, do not; they do not have to wait for “expanding political opportunities” in the form of reduced repression.

Prominent process theorists admit that challenging cultural codes is a central goal of certain social movements, even many that are substantially or primarily oriented toward the state or polity (e.g., women’s movements,

ecology movements, gay and lesbian movements).⁷ Yet the cases they study—including those in recent volumes edited by process theorists (e.g., Traugott, 1995; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 1996a)—include few countercultural movements or movement activities. Process theorists have mostly ignored literary, musical, and other artistic movements that challenge dominant beliefs and symbols, influence collective identities, and even penetrate more state-oriented movements—efforts such as the folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s (Cantwell, 1995), the contemporary “hip-hop” movement (Rose, 1994), or the steelband movement in Trinidad and Tobago (Stuempfle, 1995).

Moral or “prefigurative” movements that put unorthodox values or norms into practice—including religious movements, utopian communities, and self-help movements—receive scarcely more attention (cf. Smith, 1991). Like artistic movements, these movements challenge dominant cultural beliefs and ideologies without directly confronting, and in some cases intentionally avoiding, the state or polity members. Of course, such movements are never hermetically sealed off from broader political forces, but neither do they look to exploit—or even care much about—specific political opportunities. Other things being equal, we would expect the political opportunity variables proposed by McAdam to tell us less about these types of movements than about more state-oriented ones.

One might object that the political opportunity thesis was never meant to explain countercultural movements like these. Perhaps it only works, or works best, for citizenship movements such as labor and civil rights. Yet, if so, why? Must the state be target, audience, and ultimately judge for a movement’s demands? In this case, the collective identity in whose name a movement speaks has already been legally defined; it requires less cultural construction (Morris, 1992).⁸ Also, if the repression is obvious and constant, as for southern blacks in the 1950s, then grievances and the will to protest are likely to be there already. In such cases, repression can be assumed, with its removal leading to collective activity. Only by sorting political opportunities into a variety of component variables can we begin to see which are relevant to what movements.

A bias exists not only in the kinds of movements studied, but also in the activities observed and explained in those movements. Countercultural and prefigurative practices of movements, even of movements that are

⁷McAdam suggests that if social movements “are to become a force for social change,” they must “ultimately shape public policy and state action” (1996b:339–340). However, this may prejudice the ways in which social change occurs.

⁸Although most process theorists would deny any kinship with rational-choice approaches to social movements, both tend to assume that group interests are well defined in advance of mobilization.

more directly oriented toward states and polities, tend (again, with a few exceptions) to be slighted. When these practices are examined, furthermore, they are explained not by political opportunities, but by “framing processes” (see later). Whether they intend to or not, then, process theorists tend to ignore precisely those types of movements and movement activities for which “narrowly political” opportunities are least relevant, focusing on those movements and activities that best “prove” the usefulness of political opportunity variables.

HOW DO OPPORTUNITIES WORK?

We have argued that the conceptual looseness of “political opportunities,” combined with an appealing aura of rigor and structure, has encouraged their broad application to social movements. Political opportunities have become a kind of theoretical Rorschach blot that researchers can apply, in a variety of ways, to the movements that interest them. Political opportunities, in sum, have suffered the fate that “resources” often did within resource-mobilization theory: virtually anything that, in retrospect, can be seen as having helped a movement mobilize or attain its goals becomes labeled a political opportunity. Yet if one attempts to avoid the triviality or tautology of an expansive definition of political opportunities, they explain a correspondingly smaller and smaller part of movement emergence. For an extraordinarily large number of processes and events, political and otherwise, potentially influence movement mobilization, and they do so in historically complex combinations and sequences.

The misapplication of structural metaphors makes it difficult to specify how political opportunities affect movement actions. As Gamson and Meyer (1996:282, our emphasis) note, “for many of the political opportunity variables . . . there is no consensus on exactly *how* they affect opportunity. Some seem to open and close political space simultaneously.” If Gamson and Meyer are right, there is logically no way to specify the political opportunity thesis in a way that would render it unambiguously (and nontautologically) true.

When political opportunities are visualized as stable structures, it should be obvious how they constrain action. However, most theorists insist that they change over time—often a very short time—in ways that “open” opportunities for movements.⁹ In that case, political opportunities are meta-

⁹The more political opportunities are restricted to the most stable aspects of a political system, the more useful they become for explaining cross-national differences in mobilization and protest, and the less useful they become for explaining changes over short periods of time. European scholars seem to think more readily in cross-national terms, so that it is natural to describe

phorically seen as “windows” that open and close (Kingdon, 1995). They are either there or not there. Instead, we might think of them as institutional avenues that channel protest in certain ways rather than others, only rarely closing it off altogether. Most frequently, political action is invited to go down legal rather than illegal routes, electoral rather than disruptive channels, into hierarchical rather than egalitarian organizational forms. Only at the extreme is it blocked altogether, ultimately through military or police force. Even then, it may take other forms, such as complaining, jokes, or gossip (Scott, 1985, 1990). Political structures and opportunities normally open up certain routes even while they discourage others.

This is a simple point about structures. Giddens (1984) insists that structures enable action as well as constrain it—although he too often reifies structure into a thing of its own (Sewell, 1992). As Foucault often showed, power and institutions produce actions, sensibilities, and ideas—they do not merely constrain them. Process theorists seem to see power as a purely negative constraint, preventing people from doing what they want. So when they find an opening, they break loose and protest. The term “opportunity” implies a preexisting desire waiting for a chance at fulfillment. If instead we think of a shifting playing field, with various institutions, cultural constructions, and strategic players, we can see that political action (and the impulses, grievances, and interests that go into it) is both channeled and created in a variety of ways without having to lapse into “window” metaphors. Institutions inspire and demand action as well as constrain it.

Gamson and Meyer, for example, discuss how elections shape social movement mobilization. Because competitive elections are an element of a relatively open political system in McAdam’s terms, they would seem to indicate that political opportunities do in fact exist for movement mobilization. As Gamson and Meyer point out, however, things are not quite so simple:

Do elections . . . open opportunity for a debate and resolution of central societal conflicts? Or do they close it by suppressing debate on these conflicts and diverting attention to the personalities and characters of candidates rather than their differences on public policy? There is some evidence for both, but the precise mix of opportunity and constraint that elections provide remains an open question. (1996:282)

The question remains “open,” in fact, because the precise effect of elec-

political-structural “variables” that are usually quite stable over decades; they vary instead in comparative perspective. Many American scholars seem to insist that their “structural” variables must vary over time, usually to explain why a movement arises when it does. This pushes researchers like McAdam into the position of talking about how basic structures change, sometimes rapidly—which suggests that they may not be so “structural” after all.

tions—or of any other political opportunity—on movement mobilization is not invariant, but historically and situationally contingent. Their effects depend on structural factors such as electoral systems, strategic ones such as shifting alliances, and cultural factors such as resonant slogans and images. These factors channel political action toward certain paths, away from others.

Two other factors generally cited as political opportunities—the availability of elite allies and access to political authorities—are equally ambiguous in their effects, as Kriesi suggests in his discussion of new social movements:

Support from a powerful ally is ambivalent from the point of view of the development of an SMO [i.e., a social movement organization]: On the one hand, such an ally may provide important resources; on the other hand, it may also reduce the autonomy of the SMO and threaten its stability in the long run. Similarly, the establishment of a working relationship with the authorities also has ambivalent implications for the development of the SMO: On the one hand, public recognition, access to decision-making procedures and public subsidies may provide crucial resources and represent important successes for the SMO; on the other hand, the integration into established systems of interest intermediation may impose limits on the mobilization capacity of the SMO and alienate important parts of its constituency, with the consequence of weakening it in the long run. (1996:155–156)

Kenneth Roberts, reviewing a number of recent studies of social movements in Latin America, has similarly noted how in some cases democratization “may provide social actors with new channels of access to political institutions, but it can also remove authoritarian rulers against which opposition forces unified and mobilized, inject divisive forms of partisan competition into social organizations, and resurrect political parties and electoral activities that can siphon off energy from social networks” (1997:139).

Finally, consider the impact of state violence on mobilization. McAdam seems to imply that the absence or “lifting” of repression is an opportunity for mobilization; but many have argued the opposite. The effect of state violence on movement mobilization depends on many additional circumstances, mostly cultural and strategic. Sometimes the relationship is not inverse, but curvilinear. Brockett’s recent study of protest in Central America shows how indiscriminate state violence initially resulted in the expansion of popular mobilization, including the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua:

Although . . . violence became increasingly widespread, brutal, and arbitrary, initially it did not deter popular mobilization but provoked even greater mass opposition. Opponents who were already active redoubled their efforts, and some turned to violence. Increasing numbers of nonelites gave their support to the growing revolutionary armies, many becoming participants themselves. Previously passive regime opponents were activated, and new opponents were created as the indiscriminate violence delegitimized regimes, on the one hand, and created incentives for opposition, such as protection, revenge, and justice, on the other. (1995:132)

Brockett's observations suggest, finally, that the political opportunity thesis is not simply tautological, trivial, insufficient, or ambiguous; it is, as an invariant causal hypothesis, just plain wrong. There are innumerable instances of social movement mobilization in contexts where political opportunities can only be described as *contracting*. Indeed, mobilization is often a defensive *response* to contracting political opportunities. "For some challengers," note Meyer and Staggenborg, "increased political openness enhances the prospects for mobilization, while other movements seem to respond more to threat than opportunity" (1996:1634). By itself, the political opportunity concept does not allow one to predict which of these dynamics (if either) will actually occur.

McAdam's analysis of the emergence of the gay rights movement in the months following the Stonewall riot of June 1969 is a case in point. "It is hard to account for the rise of this movement," he suggests, "on the basis of expanding political opportunities" (1995:225). There were no particular changes in existing political institutions, McAdam notes, that suddenly advantaged gays at this time, nor did the movement benefit from a major political realignment:

In fact, the movement was preceded by a highly significant electoral realignment that can only be seen as disadvantageous to gays. I am referring, of course, to Richard Nixon's ascension to the White House in [1969], marking the end of a long period of liberal Democratic dominance in presidential politics. If anything, then, it would appear that the movement arose in a context of *contracting* political opportunities. (McAdam, 1995:225, emphasis in original; see also McAdam, 1996a:32)

McAdam argues more generally that political opportunities "would appear to be largely irrelevant in the rise of spin-off movements"—that is, movements that are inspired to varying degrees by earlier "initiator" movements. He suggests that "one would be hard-pressed to document a significant expansion in political opportunities in the case of all—or even most—spin-off movements" (1995:224). However, if most movements arise in the wake of "initiator" movements, as components of larger "cycles of protest" (Tarrow, 1994:chap. 9), and if most of these "spin-off" movements are not the result of expanding political opportunities, then it follows that many, if not most, social movements are not the result of expanding political opportunities.

None of this is to deny the obvious—that any number of political processes may powerfully influence movement mobilization. However, mobilization does not necessarily depend on expanding opportunities (except in the tautological sense), and such opportunities, when they are important, do not result from some invariant menu of factors, but from situationally specific combinations and sequences of political processes—none of which, in the abstract, has determinate consequences.

Table I. The Political Environment of Social Movements

Time-scale	Can movement actors affect it?	
	Usually not, or marginally	More often, or more powerfully
Longer-term factors	Political structures, e.g., electoral systems, implementation powers, administrative structures	Laws
	Constitutions	Court decisions
	State's physical capacity for repression	Administrative procedures
	Shorter-term factors	Actions of opponents, state
Shorter-term factors	External events, e.g., accidents	Media coverage of protest
	Information revealed, e.g., scandals	State repression
	Shifts in elite alliances	

Table I is both an effort to distinguish different kinds of political opportunities and a demonstration of the structural bias that we have discussed. It sorts factors by two important dimensions: how stable or impermanent the factor is, and the extent to which movements themselves can affect it. *Structures*, as the term is usually used, should be relatively stable and unaffected by movement strategies—the upper-left box. In Table I, neither boundary is absolute. New laws and court decisions may be influenced by movement lobbying, but once enacted they become part of the longer-term structural context. Likewise the distinction between shorter- and longer-term factors is a continuum, so that, for example, a nuclear accident like Chernobyl can have long-lasting reverberations. This is especially true because, although the antinuclear movement did not cause the accident, it guaranteed it a life in public memory. Which brings us to another point about the table: With the partial exception of the structures in the upper-left corner, all these factors are affected by conscious strategies, decisions, and (ultimately) actions of protestors, their opponents, and state actors. These factors tend to get treated as though they were stable structures rather than the outcomes of actions informed by strategic calculations. A common example, we saw, is that actual state repression is collapsed into the state's capacity for repression, as though it were automatic (Jasper and Poulsen, 1993). Like culture, strategic action pervades this typology.

Most of these opportunities are better analyzed as strategic than as structural—although both kinds of opportunity exist. Proper conceptualization of strategic thinking would entail an attention to timing, the choice of tactics from within repertoires, the psychology of expectations and surprise, and sources of credibility and trust. We would need to examine, as game

theorists suggest, the mutual expectations of different strategic players, and not just those of the state and protestors, but of bystanders, the news media, potential allies, and nonstate targets. Because strategy is necessarily open-ended, it has been especially poorly studied under structural predispositions. Of the several questions one could ask about strategy—where do the available repertoires of tactics come from, how do activists choose from among them, how do they apply the ones they choose, what effects different choices have—only the first and last, the most structural issues, have been well addressed (see Tilly, 1978, and Gamson, 1975, respectively). The actual choice of actions from within the repertoire—not to mention issues of timing and style in their application—have been almost completely ignored (see Jasper, 1997:chaps. 10, 13).

Political opportunities were once called political opportunity structures—an oxymoron that collapsed fleeting strategic opportunities into stable structures. Presumably, “political opportunities” were meant to avoid this trap, but they continue to be treated as structures, even when they are seen as changing or changeable. Structures and strategies, despite their different logics, get conflated. What are structures if not something fixed, stable, and outside our control? We must work within structures, taking their shapes into account. But if they change frequently or easily, especially as a result of strategic choices, then they should not be labeled structures. Certain aspects of the political environment are difficult to change, and others change frequently—which should probably be the starting point for any effort to categorize political opportunities. However, the utility of restricting the definition of political opportunities depends, in the end, on what other factors are then added to the mix.

THE POLITICAL PROCESS MODEL

The political process model addresses some of the difficulties with the narrow political opportunity thesis, adding social/organizational and cultural factors to the latter’s political ones. McAdam, for example, while extensively employing the political opportunity concept, has complained about “mechanistic” theories that “depict social movements as the inevitable by-products of expanding political opportunities” (1996b:339, 354). No less than the political opportunity thesis, however, the broader process model frequently aims at a chimerical general theory of social movements and relies on overly structural conceptualizations. For instance, “mobilizing structures” (primarily social networks and formal organizations) are supposed to be a recognition of the dynamic element in movement emergence, but analysts tend to view them as preexisting structures, not as creations

of movement organizers. Networks are seen as almost physical structures, rather than the information, ideas, and emotions that “flow” through them (Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994; Jasper and Poulsen, 1995).

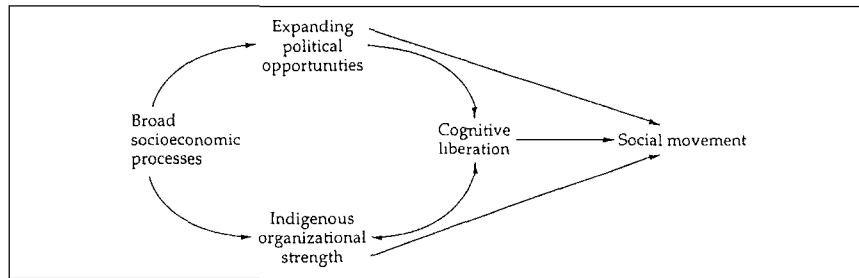
The political process model claims that social movements result when expanding political opportunities are seized by people who are formally or informally organized, aggrieved, and optimistic that they can successfully redress their grievances. As McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald put it (1996b:8):

Most political movements and revolutions are set in motion by social changes that render the established political order more vulnerable or receptive to challenge. But these “political opportunities” are but a necessary prerequisite to action. In the absence of sufficient organization—whether formal or informal—such opportunities are not likely to be seized. Finally, mediating between the structural requirements of opportunity and organization are the emergent meanings and definitions—or frames—shared by the adherents of the burgeoning movement.

Social movements emerge, then, not just when political opportunities are expanding, but also when would-be “insurgents have available to them ‘mobilizing structures’ of sufficient strength to get the movement off the ground” and “feel both aggrieved about some aspect of their lives and optimistic that, acting collectively, they can redress the problem” (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 1996b:5, 13).¹⁰ However, if McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald really mean that “most” movements arise in this way, which ones are the exceptions? Also, how can political opportunities be “necessary” prerequisites if they are not always necessary? For practical purposes, these authors seem to believe that they are always necessary; “most” is a qualifier that receives no theoretical attention. We have here, then, what seems like an invariant recipe for social movements, the necessary and sufficient ingredients of which consist of political opportunities (which come first, either logically or chronologically), mobilizing structures, and (“mediating” between them) cultural framings. The political process model also tells us why movements—all movements—decline or disappear: Political opportunities contract, mobilizing structures weaken or disintegrate, or cultural frames come to delegitimize or practically discourage protest.

The model proposed by McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald and by Tarrow is basically an updated version of that first presented by McAdam in 1982 (Fig. 1). Where McAdam once spoke of “indigenous organizational strength,” political process theorists now speak of “mobilizing structures” or “social networks”; where McAdam spoke of “cognitive liberation” (or “insurgent consciousness”), political process theorists now speak of “cul-

¹⁰Tarrow’s formulation is similar: “Triggered by the incentives created by political opportunities, combining conventional and challenging forms of action and building on social networks and cultural frames is how movements overcome the obstacles to collective action and sustain their interactions with opponents and with the state” (Tarrow, 1994:1).



Source: McAdam, 1982:51.

Fig. 1. McAdam's political process model of movement emergence.

tural framings.” Otherwise, these models appear the same. As we have suggested, a diagram of this scope is either a way of categorizing a vast array of causal mechanisms—in which case it says little about what actually causes any particular social movement—or (if it is meant as a causal diagram) an unrealistically simple, invariant model.

Does the political process model remedy the narrowness of the opportunity thesis? Does it explain mobilization? If, as we argued, expanding political opportunities are not, in fact, necessary, let alone sufficient, for movement mobilization, then the process model may be indefensible for this reason alone. Nonetheless, for the sake of argument, let us assume that expanding political opportunities, however defined, are necessary for social movement mobilization. The question then becomes: When such opportunities exist, do certain “mobilizing structures” and “cultural framings” explain the emergence of social movements? The answer again depends on what these concepts mean, and again there is considerable conceptual slippage due to PPT’s structural bias.

Certainly, social movements cannot emerge where people are unable, for whatever reason, to form the minimal solidarity necessary for mounting and sustaining a challenge to authorities or cultural codes. Nor can movements emerge among a population with no shared beliefs. According to the earlier definitions, a social movement does not simply presuppose, but is itself an organized and self-conscious field of actors with grievances and common purposes, however shifting and negotiable. So if “mobilizing structures” means something like “organizations and advocacy networks” (Gamson and Meyer, 1996:283), and “cultural framings” means something like collective identities, grievances, and shared goals, then they are certainly prerequisites to social movement emergence. Understood in this way, however, the political process model is simply circular, with mobilizing

structures and cultural framings built into the definition of a social movement.

Process theorists exhibit somewhat more consensus in specifying “mobilizing structures” and “cultural framings” than they do with “political opportunities.” Unfortunately, structural biases have led “mobilizing structures” to be specified so broadly that the political process model becomes trivial, if not (once again) tautological, whereas “cultural framing” has been specified so narrowly that it fails to capture some of the most important ways that culture matters for social movements. Mobilizing structures, in fact, have been called on to do much of the explanatory work of culture. Let us examine each of these problems in turn.

Political process theorists do not agree on a single, consistent definition of mobilizing structures, but they clearly conceptualize such structures very broadly. McCarthy, for example, defines them as:

[T]hose agreed upon ways of engaging in collective action which include particular “tactical repertoires,” particular “social movement organizational” forms, and “modular social movement repertoires.” I also mean to include the range of everyday life micromobilization structural social locations that are not aimed primarily at movement mobilization, but where mobilization may be generated: these include family units, friendship networks, voluntary associations, work units, and elements of the state structure itself. (1996:141)

McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald offer a somewhat different but equally broad definition: “By mobilizing structures we mean *those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action.*” These “collective vehicles” are said to include “meso-level groups, organizations, and informal networks,” “various grassroots settings—work and neighborhood, in particular,” “churches and colleges,” and “informal friendship networks” (1996b:3–4, emphasis in original).

There are two problems with these and kindred specifications of mobilizing structures. The first is that the concept is so broadly defined that no analyst could possibly fail to uncover one or another mobilizing structure “behind” or “within” a social movement. The concrete specification replaces tautology with triviality. Indeed, one would obviously have a difficult time finding any person on the face of the earth—within or without social movements—who was not “aboard,” so to speak, one or another (and probably several) such “collective vehicles.” Anyone alive inhabits such structures (Piven and Cloward, 1992). The concept thus begs the question of how and when certain of these “structures,” but not others, actually facilitate collective protest.

Second, these “collective vehicles”—indeed, social relations as such—can just as easily drive people away from social movements as hitch the two together. Affectual relationships, for example, can solidify social movements, but they are also a potential threat to group solidarities (see, e.g.,

Kanter, 1972; Goodwin, 1997). For example, as Philip Slater suggested, “an intimate dyadic relationship always threatens to short-circuit the libidinal network of the community and drain off its source of sustenance” (1963:348). Indeed, most of the “mobilizing structures” noted by McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald are probably, most of the time, *demobilizing* structures. “In point of fact,” McAdam and Paulsen point out:

Social ties may constrain as well as encourage activism. Our failure to acknowledge the variable impact of social ties is due, in turn, to our failure to take account of the “multiple embeddings” that characterize people’s lives . . . [I]ndividuals are invariably embedded in many organizational or association networks or individual relationships that may expose the individual to conflicting behavioral pressures. (1993:645, 641)

Social movement organizations themselves, ironically, can potentially discourage movement mobilization because “the formation of formal organizations renders the movement increasingly vulnerable to oligarchization, co-optation, and the dissolution of indigenous support,” especially if “insurgents increasingly seek to cultivate ties to *outside* groups,” including “elite allies” (McAdam, 1982:55–56, emphasis added). In the absence of clear thinking about how mobilizing structures operate, their various specifications—like those of “political opportunities”—have ambiguous and contradictory effects on movement mobilization, making it impossible to specify the political process model in an unambiguous (and nontautological) way.

Finally, what kind of mobilizing “structures” are necessary for movement recruitment? Can a small number of organizers create their own mobilizing structures? If so, what is “structural” about them? Many dedicated activists were initially recruited into social movements—and many other people recruited into specific collective actions orchestrated by movements—despite the absence of social ties or organizational affiliations linking such people to those movements (or to one another). In her well-known study of the early pro-life movement in California, Luker found that two-thirds of the pro-life activists whom she interviewed were “self-recruits” to that movement: “That is, they encountered on their own information about the abortion situation that distressed them, and then they actively sought out an organized political group that shared their values” (Luker, 1984:147). Jasper and Poulsen (1995) found a large number of animal-rights activists who, at the time they were recruited, knew no one else in the movement. In other words, certain types of movement mobilization may not require “mobilizing structures” of the structural sort envisioned by process theorists. The use of leaflets and television advertising can, in some cases, replace personal and organizational ties.

When Snow *et al.* (1980), reviewing the literature on recruitment, found that personal ties to someone already in the movement were the best

predictor of who would join, they already showed a structural bias. They concluded (1980:798, our emphasis) that “the probability of being recruited into a particular movement is largely a function of two conditions: (1) links to one or more movement members through a pre-existing or *emergent* interpersonal tie; and (2) the absence of countervailing networks.” Through the qualifier “largely,” networks are asserted as more important than other factors. More significant is the (untheorized) idea of “emergent” ties, meaning that a recruit will meet people in the movement and develop personal bonds with them (Wallis and Bruce, 1980). This kind of tie, created by or within the movement itself, is crucial for the retention of members. It is not at all a preexisting “structure,” but the result of a movement’s own activities, guided by strategic choices. Just as protestors can create their own political opportunities, they can create their own mobilizing structures.

That people can be recruited outside preexisting networks suggests the independent importance of cultural persuasion as a factor explaining mobilization. Its influence, however, is often obscured by the structural concentration on networks. Networks and culture are often discussed as though one or the other could affect recruitment, but in fact networks amount to little without the ideas and affective bonds that keep them together. Mobilizing structures are thus credited with much of the explanatory power of culture (meanings and affects) and active strategizing (on the part of the activists who build networks and found organizations). We have here a classic instance of conceptual reification: Ongoing, strategic reasoning and actual collective action have been transformed into inert, impersonal “structures” and “vehicles.”

Table II, which categorizes elements of movements’ social and organizational environments, is parallel to Table I. The “structural” box in the upper left contains the factors most favored by process theorists; other factors, such as movement-created networks, are often discussed as though they belonged in that box. Cultural factors are again slighted, for they permeate all of the variables listed here, even the most structural ones. Strategy again tends to be ignored in favor of more structural factors.

FRAMING AND CULTURE

In one sense, the notion of cultural framings—like political opportunities and mobilizing structures—is overly broad, subsuming a variety of factors that are potentially contradictory in their effects and that need to be carefully disaggregated, including collective identities, grievances, goals, repertoires of contention, and the sense of efficacy or empowerment.¹¹ In

¹¹The following paragraphs draw on Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1996a,b.

Table II. The Social Environment of Social Movements

Time-scale	Can movement actors affect it?	
	Usually not, or marginally	More often, or more powerfully
Longer-term factors	Preexisting networks of potential recruits	Endowed movement organizations
	Communications and transportation infrastructure	Social networks developed by movement
	Residential or occupational density	“Free spaces”
	Formal organizations independent of movement: churches, professional associations, unions	Collective identities, boundaries
Shorter-term factors	Demographic shifts	
	Mobilization and activity of other movements	Short-lived movement organizations Protest events, arguments that attract attention Network ties activated by movement

another sense, however, political process theorists have defined cultural framings so narrowly that the concept is inadequate for grasping the many ways in which culture shapes social movements.¹²

In an example of misplaced concreteness, process theorists tend to reify culture—to conceptualize it as a distinct (and delimited) empirical social sphere or type of social action—instead of conceptualizing (and analyzing) culture as an ubiquitous and constitutive dimension of all social relations, structures, networks, and practices. The distinction between “cultural framings,” on the one hand and “political opportunities” and “mobilizing structures,” on the other is too often taken to mean that the latter two somehow stand outside of culture, which “mediates” between them (see Williams, 1977, for a critique of the “mediation” model of culture). To be sure, a number of process theorists clearly reject this implication—suggesting, for example, that political contexts and the organizational forms of movements are as much cultural as “structural” (see, respectively, Gamson and Meyer, 1996, and Clemens, 1996). Nonetheless, for most process theorists, “framing” and “culture” continue to be more or less equated with the self-conscious activities of social movement participants, especially

¹²Frame analysis, first developed by Erving Goffman (1974), was imported into social movement theory by Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina (1982) and Snow *et al.* (1986). For critiques, see Jasper and Poulsen (1995), Emirbayer and Goodwin (1996a), Kane (1997), and Benford (1997).

leading activists. All nonstructural factors get rolled into this tiny ball, but the reduction of culture to strategy does justice to neither.

McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald tell us that they intentionally want to “define framing rather narrowly” in just this way because “recent writings have tended to equate the concept with any and all cultural dimensions of social movements,” a reduction, they add, which “threatens to rob the [framing] concept of its coherence” (1996b:6). This is reasonable. However, instead of opening up the political process model to new forms of cultural analysis that might help us understand “any and all cultural dimensions of social movements,” McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald seem to call for cultural analysis based solely on this “rather narrowly” defined notion of framing.

According to this definition, framing refers (or should refer) to “the *conscious, strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action*” (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 1996b:6, emphasis in original).¹³ Such efforts are undoubtedly important, but culture—in such diverse forms as traditions, “common sense,” material artifacts, idioms, rituals, news routines, know-how, identities, discourse, and speech genres—also constrains and enables collective action in ways that are not always or even usually intentional or instrumental (see, e.g., Geertz, 1983; Swidler, 1986; Bakhtin, 1986; Sewell, 1992; Steinberg, 1995).¹⁴ Indeed, culture in this larger sense shapes framing processes themselves, typically in ways unrecognized by actors themselves. For example, what Steinberg calls “discursive repertoires” constrain the frames that actors may fashion: “They bound the set of meanings through which challengers can articulate claims and ideologically mediate the decision to act instrumentally” (1995:60). Identities, too, are logically prior to the strategic pursuit of interests; a group or individual must know who they are before they can know what interests they have (Ringmar, 1996). There is no logical or theoretical reason, in short, to privilege frame analysis as the preferred form, much less the only form, of cultural inquiry for the study of social movements.

The bias here is that frames are dichotomized as either successful or not, with organizers and recruiters trying a series of frames until they find those that work, which “fit” or “resonate” with the sensibilities of potential recruits. In this view, frames are like political opportunities—“windows” that are either open or closed. (The structural imagery is clear; even though

¹³A “frame” has been defined as an “interpretive scheme that simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there’” (Snow and Benford, 1992:137).

¹⁴McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald do recognize that “at the outset, participants [in social movements] may not even be fully aware that they are engaged in an interpretive process of any real significance” (1996b:16). However, is the implication that we should ignore such processes because they are not “conscious” and “strategic”?

“framing” is meant to connote process, it is still based on the structural metaphor of a frame.) However, the statements and actions of organizers and protestors—actions send messages just as surely as words do—affect a variety of audiences in a variety of ways. Even when narrowed to recruitment, they affect potential recruits in diverse ways, perhaps changing people’s sensibilities without, or before, recruiting them. What is lost is the broader culture within which both organizers and recruits operate.

An instrumental or structural perspective on culture distorts. McAdam, for example, argues that the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., by employing Christian themes (among others) in his speeches, “brought an unusually compelling, yet accessible frame to the [civil rights] struggle” (1996b:347). For example, “the theme of Christian forgiveness that runs throughout King’s thought,” notes McAdam, “was deeply reassuring to a white America burdened (as it still is) by guilt and a near phobic fear of black anger and violence” (1996b:347). Yet does McAdam believe that King made a calculated decision to employ Christian themes in his speeches as part of a “strategic effort” to legitimate the civil rights movement? That is like saying King made a strategic choice to speak English, rather than seeing English as part of the culture shared by King and his audiences. McAdam’s definition of framing seems to imply this kind of strategizing, yet he produces no evidence to support this claim. Nor does he mention the possibility that King employed Christian themes because, as a Baptist minister with a doctorate in theology, he actually believed that those “themes” were true or valuable for their own sake.

Finally, frame analysis suffers from an ideational or cognitive bias. Not only do the dramatically staged actions of social movements send symbolic messages as important as those in movement rhetoric (McAdam, 1996b), but the affectual and emotional dimensions of social movements are also as important as the cognitive and moral. For example, collective identities and attributions of injustice (“injustice frames”) are typically viewed by proponents of the process model as the outcomes or achievements of framing processes (see, e.g., Hunt, Benford, and Snow, 1994). In McAdam’s early effort to add culture to process models, he argued that “objective” opportunities only lead to action when potential protestors undergo “cognitive liberation.” As he described it, “the altered responses of members to a particular challenger serve to transform evolving political conditions into a set of ‘cognitive cues’ signifying to insurgents that the political system is becoming increasingly vulnerable to challenge” (1982:49). Although the term seems to imply a radical change in worldview, cognitive liberation appears to be a relatively instrumental reading of available information (“cues”) about the state’s willingness to repress dissent.

Yet collective identities and injustice frames—not to mention group

solidarity and commitment (see, e.g., Kanter, 1972; Zablocki, 1980)—are usually more than simply cognitive or discursive framings; they often have powerful emotional and psychological—and not always fully conscious—dimensions (see, e.g., Hunt, 1992). Jasper (1997) shows that basic concepts such as cognitive liberation, collective identity, and frame analysis gain much of their causal force from the emotions involved—although at the theoretical level these are ignored by researchers. The same is true of the social networks and “mobilizing structures” concepts, which invoke social ties that are often affectual or libidinal (Goodwin, 1997) or otherwise saturated with emotions. Unfortunately, PPT and frame analysis in particular provide little conceptual or theoretical space for these issues within their research agendas. What Scheff (1994a:282) says about studies of nationalist movements applies to PPT more generally: “Descriptions of . . . movements note [their] passion, indeed the very pages crackle with it. But these descriptions do little to conceptualize, analyze, or interpret it.” (Recall McAdam’s passing allusion, quoted previously, to “a white America burdened [as it still is] by guilt and a near phobic fear of black anger.”)

Table III lays out some of the cultural and strategic factors important to social movement emergence and success. The boundaries continue to be permeable, because shorter-term developments can have long-term ef-

Table III. Cultural and Strategic Factors

Time-scale	Can movement actors affect it?	
	Usually not, or marginally	More often, or more powerfully
Longer-term factors	“Plausibility structures” Institutionalized news media routines Standard cultural repertoires of images, tropes, language, assumptions Tactical repertoires, “know-how” Master frames	Slogans, policy proposals Affective bonds within movement Movement identity, pride Skills of particular leaders, recruiters
Shorter-term factors	Fashions in media attention Opponents’ efforts to affect public opinion, sensibilities, media Governmental efforts to influence opinion, sensibilities, media	Symbolic effects of protest events Arguments, rhetoric that attract attention Outrage, indignation over opponents’ policies Credibility of opponents Frames Strategic choices about timing, style, application of tactics

facts, and movements, if successful, can alter the broader cultural environment. We include strategic factors here because they are a form of knowledge and skill like other aspects of culture. The structural bias is often at work here, as it is in the concentration on explaining tactical repertoires of contention rather than choices about their actual employment (parallel to explaining capacities for repression rather than their use). Framing, absorbing as it must all of culture and much of strategy, cannot fall into this upper-left box, but must fall into its diagonal opposite. Undue focus on the concept obscures the interaction between movement framings and the broader culture, as well as ignoring the many other dimensions of culture that appear in Table III. It should be obvious how many of these factors affect a movement's ability to create, interpret, and use mobilizing structures and political opportunities.

SOME MODEST PROPOSALS

Theoretical critiques are like sociopaths: Their aggressive drives are rarely balanced by constructive instincts. Instead of ending on a purely negative note, accordingly, here are several suggestions that we hope might improve social movement analysis:

1. *Abandon invariant models.* The search for universally valid propositions and models, at least for anything so complex as social movements, is bound to fail. As Tilly suggests, it would be nice if history had such a tidy causal structure, but it does not: "real history, carefully observed, does not fall into neat, recurrent chunks; it winds and snarls like a proliferating vine. What is more, in real history time and place make a difference to the way that ostensibly universal processes . . . unfold" (1994:59). If he is right, it makes little sense to search for that presumptive handful of necessary and sufficient causes that allegedly explain each and every social movement. Nor does it make sense to lump under one rubric all of the potentially important causal factors that empirical research has uncovered. Even when they do not intend to, process theorists appear to propose invariant models because of the structural models they deploy; greater attention to strategic choice, cultural meanings, and emotions would highlight the complex, open-ended quality of social conflict.

At the empirical level, we need to be sensitive to the historically shifting and situationally contingent combinations and sequences of processes and events that give rise to varying forms of social

movements and collective action more generally. At the theoretical level, we need to recognize that a variety of concepts and theories may help us “hit” this moving target. Fidelity to, say, three big concepts is the last thing we need. Rather, the explanation of empirical variation will likely require considerable conceptual and theoretical variation as well. Some kinds of movements require political opportunities, whereas others do not; some recruit through preexisting social networks, whereas others do not; some require powerful grievances or collective identities, whereas others do not. Parsimonious models are not very useful when they explain only a limited range of the empirical cases that they are meant to cover.

2. *Beware of conceptual stretching.* As we have seen, some process theorists have stretched the concept of “political opportunities” to be virtually synonymous with the larger “environment” in which social movements are embedded. The concept of “mobilizing structures,” for its part, seems to have been coined in the first place so as to encompass a vast range of formal and informal organizations and networks as well as (for some) strategic and tactical repertoires. Even the concept of “cultural framings,” which excludes many important forms of culture, subsumes such diverse factors as grievances, purposes, collective identities, repertoires of contention, and the sense of power or efficacy. Unfortunately, this type of “conceptual stretching” quickly becomes self-defeating (see Sartori, 1970; Collier and Mahon, 1993). To begin with, it tends to undermine the shared understanding of concepts that is a necessary foundation for any research program or, indeed, for rational communication. When original definitions are subverted and new ones proliferate endlessly, an Alice in Wonderland pseudodialogue ensues: Everyone uses the same words but gives them different meanings. As concepts include more and more variables or specifications, the theoretical hypotheses built on them tend to become trivial and, ultimately, tautological. Conceptual hyperinflation, like its economic analogue, destroys whatever explanatory value concepts once had. Conceptual stretching is especially problematic in a field where many scholars know well only one movement, or one type of movement, so that they lack a sound comparative base for assessing the plausibility of their models (Jasper, 1997).
3. *Recognize that cultural and strategic processes define and create the factors usually presented as “structural.”* Culture permeates the political opportunities and mobilizing structures of process theorists. Perceptions are not only necessary for potential protestors to recognize opportunities, but in many cases perceptions can create oppor-

tunities. In addition to opportunities, meanings and emotions keep social networks alive, and do much of the work normally credited to network “structures.” Formal organizations too depend on cultural expectations for much of their force (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991).

Other cultural dynamics are not captured by framing. We need a better appreciation of the symbolism of events and individuals, so that we can see how they discourage or encourage political action. We also need to understand the logic of emotions and of moral principles and intuitions. We should never assume a willingness, even eagerness to protest (if only the opportunities were there!) but must see how this is created.

Political opportunities and mobilizing structures are also heavily shaped by strategic considerations, by the choices movement leaders and activists make. As we have emphasized, activists can sometimes create their own opportunities and mobilizing structures. Strategic decisions depend heavily on interaction between movements and other players (especially, but not exclusively, their opponents and the state), and this interaction is strongly shaped by the expectations that each side has of the other. Each side tries to surprise, undermine, and discredit the other. Such strategies are themselves a form of cultural learning. They also depend heavily on psychology: Certain individuals are especially adept at knowing how to do what when, how to invent new tactics, how to time an action or response. Social movements can find themselves constrained by strategic stalemates (of the kind games theorists have described), not just by political structures or lack of resources. However, few strategic situations leave no room for choice or maneuver. Serious attention to strategy would be an additional way to understand true process, rather than structures parading as process.

4. *Do some splitting to balance the lumping.* The concept of political opportunities is designed as a way of talking about the environments of social movements, but researchers have begun to discover the complexity of these environments. They contain far more actors than just the state, and even the state contains diverse agents and institutions. Lumping together legal courts with the general public with agents of physical repression seems misguided. Efforts should continue to distinguish different kinds of political opportunities, different kinds of mobilizing structures, and different kinds of culture. We should, for starters, distinguish stable political structures from shifting strategic opportunities, the state from other elite institutions, physical resources from their strategic use, and strategic from other aspects of culture.

Its very proliferation of definitions and applications demonstrates the utility of PPT, which has established the importance of the political environment to a social movement's creation, dynamics, and effects. It is possible to keep these insights while recognizing the open-ended nature of the conflict and change that these movements set in motion. The apparent rigor of structural images can lead us to see things that are not there and to overlook many things that are; foremost among the latter are culture and strategy. Process theorists simply need to live up to their name.