

Key Topics in Sociology

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From political processes to cultural processes: political opportunity, frames, and contentious politics

Collective action is a dialectical process, a complex journey toward an imprecisely defined destination with side-trips and diversions, with opportunities seized or forgone, constraints avoided, surmounted or conceded in a series of more or less complex interactions with other actors encountered in its course.

(Chris Rootes 1999, 12)

This chapter is concerned with the 'political process' approach to social movements which concentrates explicitly on the 'external environment' in which social movements operate, and gives this environment explanatory weight when it comes to accounting for why social movements emerge in certain places at certain times, and whether or not they have successful outcomes.

The approach is labelled 'political' process because the main writers have suggested that the most important aspects of the environment that movements face are *political* ones. In fact, the state and political institutions play a central role, it is argued, in the emergence and fortunes of social movements; a claim that we will critically evaluate in later chapters. In looking at how political process theory has studied the external environment of movements, we will encounter some central debates – not least the debate surrounding how to relate political structures and culture to social movement mobilization – that will require us to put our 'relational' thinking to work once again.

Like political processes themselves, political process theory has not stood still. Since its inception in the 1970s, it has gone through a number of important developments, often in response to the controversy it has generated. Two such developments will be examined here. First, in the mid 1990s, political process theory developed to embrace the 'cultural turn' that was brought to its door by social theory more generally and by scholars of social movements unhappy with what they saw as a 'structuralist' bias in the theory (McAdam et al., 1996; Goodwin

and Jasper, 2004a). This will lead us into a heated debate between the so-called 'structuralists' and their counter-parts, the so-called 'cultural constructionists', that has placed an appropriate dose of ongoing contention at the core of contemporary debates. Secondly, since the turn of the twenty-first century, the main proponents of political process theory have offered an approach called 'contentious politics', which despite receiving a mixed reception, builds in important ways upon relational thinking (McAdam et al., 2001; Tilly and Tarrow, 2006).

By the end of the chapter you will understand why it is important to focus on the relationship between social movements and the world around them. You will be able to critically evaluate the concept of 'political opportunity structure' which is employed to understand this relationship. You should appreciate why the concept of cultural 'framing' is such an important complement to that of 'political opportunity', and be able to engage with the wider debates about culture that this has generated. You also will also be aware of the contentious politics agenda, and the status it has within social movement studies.

Political process theory (PPT)

In this chapter, we will be considering the work of three of the leading social movement theorists from the US: Charles Tilly (1929–2008), Doug McAdam, and Sidney Tarrow. At times, they have been referred to as 'structuralists' in their approach to social movements (although, as I will show, they are not unproblematically categorized as such). They have attracted this name because their extremely influential political process theory (PPT) places a great amount of explanatory power regarding the emergence and fate of social movements on the *external environment* and, moreover, its political components (like the state and political institutions). PPT suggests that political structures that exist prior to the ideas or actions of any one individual, and appear to them (revolutionary moments excepting) as relatively durable and unmovable, affect what social movements do and when and how they do it.

What is distinctive about PPT, compared to the other approaches we have looked at so far, is its claim – stated in strong terms by some, and much weaker terms by others – that social movements rely on the political environment being 'favourable' before they are able to mobilize or be successful. In the strong version of this claim, social movements can

only arise and have successful outcomes if the political environment is favourable. In the weak version, social movements are likely to arise and have successful outcomes, other factors depending, if the political environment is favourable. I avoid placing names against these positions because it is true to say that whilst most people would associate PPT with some claim as to the centrality of the political environment in shaping movement fortunes, whenever the strong version of the case has been levelled at a PPT theorist they have denied that it is reflective of their position (Tarrow, 2004).

This denial is not without grounds – it is supported by the developments that have taken place in PPT in which its leading proponents have talked about factors other than the political environment that are crucial in addition to it. We will come to this work – and these other factors – in the next section. Let us for the moment remain with this strongly stated claim, even if it has 'straw man' tendencies (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004c, 76), in order to understand what is distinctive, and I would argue, particularly interesting about PPT as it was originally presented.

Critics of PPT have suggested that to claim that movements rely upon a favourable external context in order to thrive and succeed is, on the one hand, not 'big news' (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004c, 79) and, on the other, invites the kind of circular argument ('tautology') that was found in strain theory (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004b, 6; Opp, 2009, 169): if movements have mobilized or been successful, presumably we can link it back to some sort of favourable context, hence we look for one and find one. If they do not mobilize and they are not successful, presumably we can link it back to some sort of unfavourable context, hence we look for one and find one. The claim does not seem to offer much analytic purchase if that is what it is saying.

PPT is, however, more interesting in its claims than that. There is no necessary reason – again as critics have pointed out – to assume that social movements *do* rely upon a favourable context. In line with the arguments of the first two chapters, perhaps the psychological strains experienced by activists, or their organizational capacity and connections, compensate for and overcome an unfavourable context. In this case, the wider political environment would not crucially matter, or only have a tempering effect on movement fortunes.

This, however, is not the case according to PPT. Their main claim is that activists can be as angry and aggrieved, as well-organized,

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Tilly
McAdam
TarrowPPT
defined
(strong/weak)

tactically astute, and brilliantly led as they like, but without a favourable political context they will get nowhere (Tarrow 1998; Koopmans, 1999, 100). This is, in fact, where PPT diverges from the resource mobilization theory (RMT) of the last chapter and with which it shares overlaps (like, for instance, some commitment to rational action theory (RAT)). PPT argues that RMT puts too much store by the internal factors of social movements and fails to properly probe what Tilly calls 'the world around' them (1978, 55). The debate point below presents the differing viewpoints of mobilization theory and PPT as expressed in a classic debate between William Gamson and Jack Goldstone.

Debate point: Gamson versus Goldstone

In the *Strategy of Social Protest* (1990 [1975]), William Gamson studied fifty-three protest groups in the US (between 1800 and 1945). Using quantitative methods, Gamson examined the factors that were correlated with social movement success. He measured success in two ways: winning new advantages and becoming a legitimate feature of the political landscape. On the basis of his findings, Gamson argued that movement organizations that were bureaucratic and centralized had the most success. The implications of the study were to suggest that if social movement organizations (SMOs) adopted the right strategy they had a better chance of achieving their goals. Gamson's data was contested by Jack Goldstone, leading to a well-known debate in social movement studies (Goldstone, 1980; Gamson 1980; Frey et al. 1992). Gamson had made his dataset available for re-analysis, and so Goldstone conducted his own statistical analyses and came to very different conclusions. Goldstone found that SMO success was correlated to national political or economic crises. New advantages were won not because of the organizational form of the SMO, but because crises created favourable external conditions. These favourable conditions for collective action were created because crises weakened the political system and provided new openings for demands to be heard. Goldstone suggested that if an SMO could hold out until a time of crisis – like a war or economic depression – then they had a good chance of winning new advantages. Bureaucratic structures only help to ensure success indirectly by enabling groups to keep going until a crisis hits. The implications of Goldstone's argument were to suggest that there is little that SMOs and their leaders can do strategically to make success more likely. This was the part of Goldstone's critique that

Gamson found particularly hard to swallow. In a response to Goldstone, he suggested that they had very different perspectives on social movements and that he preferred to concentrate upon the *internal* factors of SMOs and the things that leaders *could control*, like organization and tactics. He claimed that he had not dismissed the importance of external crises in his statistical analysis of the data, but that he had preferred to think of a crisis as an *opportunity* which had implications for the strategy of the protest group.

- In what ways can we measure social movement success?
- What is the difference between a 'crisis' and an 'opportunity'?
- Does social movement success depend upon internal factors (leadership, organization, skill), or external factors?

PPT, therefore, does make an interesting claim that it is worth considering: do social movements rely upon favourable conditions in the world around them in order to emerge and be successful? Do they rely, most importantly, upon the *political* world around them being favourable? Do political *structures* explain the 'ebbs and flows' of social movements the best? Let us begin to address these questions.

A world of political opportunity (and threat)

What does PPT mean by a 'favourable' context for collective action? By 'favourable context' they mean a context in which the environment provides potential challengers with what they label 'political opportunities' for action (Tarrow, 1998). In the Gamson versus Goldstone debate, Gamson (1980) argued that he did take into account the external environment of social movements, but unlike Goldstone (1980) who liked to talk of 'crisis' and 'breakdown' creating the favourable conditions for social movements, he preferred to talk of such things as creating 'opportunities' for action. The idea of an 'opportunity' therefore, implicitly at least, relates what is going on in the world around a social movement to the strategic response that activists themselves construct (Gamson, 1980). The language of opportunity, as Steven Buechler (2004) suggests, puts a positive spin on the more negative language of 'breakdown' that was found in strain theory, and turns things that happen in 'the world around' the movement into the very stuff of *chances* to be seized (Koopmans, 2004).

A political environment becomes favourable for collective action, then, when it presents cues to challengers that suggest that the 'time is right' (and ripe) for a challenge (McAdam, 1982). What is seemingly so crucial then about a political opportunity is that it affects the calculations that rational actors (as PPT primarily sees them) make of the costs and likely success of collective action, or – recast as Flam's emotional actors (that I preferred to talk about in the last chapter) – affect their levels of fear, anxiety, excitement, and anticipation about what is happening and what could happen. I should also mention here that alongside political opportunities, PPT has also talked about the political *threats* to a group's interests as important parts of the external environment (see van Dyke and Soule, 2002; Almeida, 2009). Although discussed much less often in the literature (McAdam, 2004), a conducive political context for collective action is also, ironically, one which threatens potential challengers' interests to the point that they adopt a 'do or die' attitude (Goldstone and Tilly, 2001). Tilly (1978, 55) therefore describes the 'world around' a social movement as one which 'sometimes threaten the group's interests... sometimes provide new chances to act on those interests'.

The centrality of the nation state

But why does PPT claim that the most important opportunities and threats for collective action are those related to the *political world* around the social movement? Tilly and Tarrow argue that social movements as we know them today emerged hand in hand with specifically political processes, namely the rise of the modern democratic nation state from the eighteenth century onwards (Tilly and Tarrow, 2006). They became the popular vehicles through which ordinary people engaged in various forms of political 'claim-making' in which the state was their direct target. Democratization goes hand in hand with social movements, which have become the accepted way in which citizens make claims on democratic governments. This kind of approach is particularly relevant for an important set of social movements termed 'citizenship movements' (Jasper, 1997; Goodwin and Jasper, 2004b).

Citizenship movements target the nation state explicitly with their demands for political rights and inclusion. Think, for example, of working class and female suffrage movements, the American civil rights

Democracy

movement, movements seeking legal reforms and changes to state policy (like pro and anti-abortion movements), movements campaigning for the extension or retraction of state intervention (like welfare movements), and movements demanding political forms of recognition (gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability, and so on). In fact, the steadily growing number of social movements making claims upon democratic institutions means that in Western liberal societies at least, we live in a 'social movement society' (Meyer and Tarrow, 1998), and as democratization spreads across the globe, even perhaps, 'a social movement world' (Goldstone, 2004).

Same-sex marriage
we live in a social-movement society

Political opportunity structure

We know now why PPT talks about the world around a social movement as a world of opportunity that is primarily political in nature. But where exactly do 'political opportunities' come from? PPT's answer is that political opportunities are embedded in the political structures of a regime. For example, routine elections in liberal democratic regimes may offer chances for collective action, and regimes in which the executive and the legislative functions of the state are distinct offer more opportunities for influence. Political opportunities can also arise from shifting alignments and divisions among political elites. For example, we came across Jenkins and Perrow's (1977) farmworkers study in Chapter 3, which showed how political divisions gave rise to a new alignment of interests between farmworkers and the middle-class liberal elite who backed their boycott and enabled a successful outcome for the Union. Chances for political influence are therefore structured in different ways according to the type of political regime that exists, and this regime provides activists with what PPT calls a 'political opportunity structure'. Tarrow and Tilly define the 'political opportunity structure' as a concept that points to:

political "regimes"

features of regimes and institutions that facilitate or inhibit a political actor's collective action and to changes in those features.

(Tarrow and Tilly, 2009, 440)

Peter Eisinger (1973) is credited with the first use of the term. Political regimes offer what Eisinger calls an 'open' political opportunity structure when they are representative and responsive to citizen demands, and offer a 'closed' political opportunity structure when they exclude

citizens, are unresponsive to their demands, and in extreme cases do not tolerate protest at all and use force to repress it.

To consider this point further, think about the political regimes that exist in different countries and the opportunities for political influence that they offer. Liberal democracies (under whose label we might include countries like the United States, UK, France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Netherlands, and Australia) ensure that people have *at least* some opportunity to influence the political system through elections, where they choose between different political parties who compete for their vote. The party elected to government 'represents' the people – albeit sometimes only in theory – but in cases where they stray too far from what the electorate want there are accepted forms of redress that can be used to hold them to account. Street demonstrations are one such form, as we saw in 2003 when decisions to go to war with Iraq were met with mass protests in which people exclaimed 'not in my name'.

We might therefore describe the political opportunity structure of a liberal democratic country as in many ways 'open', although when compared to each other we might describe some countries as more 'open' or 'closed' than others. Kitschelt's (1986) cross-national study of anti-nuclear movements in Western democracies suggested that, comparatively speaking, the German and French systems were 'closed' because they denied the movement formal representation and were not responsive to its demands, whilst Sweden and the United States were 'open' because they allowed anti-nuclear activists political access and influence.

In contrast to liberal democracies, non-democratic, authoritarian and semi-authoritarian political regimes (under whose label we might include countries like Russia, China, Cuba, Syria, Vietnam, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, North Korea, and Jordan) could be described as offering more of a 'closed' structure of political opportunities. People do not have a chance to influence the political system through elections in which they choose between political parties. Instead, authoritarian regimes tend to have only one party (e.g. the Communist Party in China). The party may appoint itself to power or may rule on the basis of less-than-transparent elections (recall the election scandal in Iran in 2009). As a consequence, political power is centralized in the hands of few politicians, or a single leader (sometimes a dictator) who is not accountable to a constitution, a parliament, or an electorate

(think of Libya under Gaddafi). They do not have to respond to people's demands, and may not tolerate demands even being aired. Power is maintained through using repressive force, like a state military and police force, which can crush collective action attempts (think of the bloodshed following the Syrian protests in 2012). Again, in comparison to each other, we might argue that some of these countries provide a more 'open' or 'closed' political opportunity structure.

Whilst the structures of the political regime in place provide differing opportunities for collective action, PPT also highlights the way in which the political interactions and choices taking place within the regime affect political opportunities. These opportunities are not so much stable features of political structures, but arise from contingent and quickly changing circumstances. Tarrow (1998) identifies four contingent circumstances in which political opportunities can arise:

- the opening up of access to the polity to new challengers
- elite realignments
- elite divisions
- changes in the capacity and propensity to use repression against challengers.

The work of Kriesi et al. (1992) highlights the second and fourth of these. They found that when in opposition, left parties like the Social Democrats were influential allies for many of the 'new social movements' of the 1980s because they wanted to bolster opposition and weaken the party in power. However, when in power, left parties paved the way for a decline in new social movement (NSM) activity as chances for reform improved anyway. Kriesi et al. (1992) also talk about the prevailing strategy of the state towards challengers. They found that France adopted an 'exclusive' strategy towards NSM challengers in the 1980s (in both formal and informal ways) and were highly repressive of protest. This led to rare but large-scale and violent outbursts of protest. Switzerland, on the other hand, adopted a 'facilitative' strategy, including NSM challengers through direct democracy. With the Swiss state not actually in a position to implement reforms however, moderate protest was a continuous feature in Switzerland.

Bringing the factors discussed so far together, Tarrow and Tilly (2009, 440) compile a list six 'properties' of political regimes that shape the political opportunity structure (see figure 4.1).

Multiplicity of independent centres of power within the regime

Relative closure or openness to new actors

Instability or stability of current political alignments

Availability of influential allies or supporters

Extent to which the regime represses or facilitates collective claim making

Decisive changes in these properties

Figure 4.1

Elements of the political opportunity structure.

Source: Tarrow and Tilly (2009), p. 440; phrasing is theirs.

Before we move on to a critical assessment of PPT, it should also be noted that Tarrow (1998) argues social movements can themselves be central to altering the political opportunity structure. He suggests that the 'early risers' (the social movements that come first and take advantage of a political opportunity) alter the opportunity structure for those who come next (Tarrow, 1998, 87). They do this by weakening political authority and providing some 'generalized' resources for mobilization (like a model of collective action for others to copy, and attention from the public and media). They can highlight where the weak points are in the political system for others to take advantage of, or they may create them themselves, thereby opening the floodgates to other challengers. This leads to an intense period of contention in society, which Tarrow (1998, 87) calls a 'cycle' or 'wave' of contention. 'Cycles of contention' are heightened periods of social conflict with a start point and an end point (Jung, 2010, 27). We could think here of the cycle of contention in the 1960s, which saw a proliferation of social movements – from the American civil rights movement, to students, women and gay liberation movements, and anti-war movements. Tarrow's argument is that the political opportunities created by changes in the

political system are really only of crucial importance to movements at the beginning of a cycle; after that, opportunities for protest in society become 'generalized' for a time, and others can take advantage of them. Jung (2010) supports this by claiming that political opportunities are only important during the initial phase of mobilization, while internal factors (like institutionalization and radicalization) explain movement decline.

It is clear from this discussion that the main tool used to mine the world around a social movement in PPT is that of 'political opportunity structure', made up of the structural and shifting components reflected in Tarrow and Tilly's (2009) list in figure 4.1. An important question regarding our approach to social movements is stirred by this concept: does it imply that we can read the emergence and fate of social movements from the political structures in the world around it? This would be a 'structuralist' explanation indeed. I argue however that this is neither accurate as an explanation of social movements, nor as a reflection of the claims and intentions of much PPT (Tilly, 2004, 34; Tarrow, 2004, 43; Meyer, 2004a, 55; Koopmans, 2004, 68).

PPT assessed

What kind of approach would argue that the choices that social movements make about when to act can be 'read off' of the political structures that constitute the world around them, such that social movements are like 'puppets on a string'? To argue this, we would have to employ the concept of 'political opportunity structure' and use it to determine how 'open' or 'closed' a polity was to political influence by studying its fixed political institutional arrangements. To determine the effect that these arrangements have on activists' choices, we would also need a fixed idea of whether closed or open political opportunity structures lead to collective action – or successful collective action – in all cases.

There is a problem with such fixed notions of political opportunity and their effects, however. Deciding whether the political opportunity structure of a nation (or region) is 'open' or 'closed' does not tell us 'for what or for who' (Meyer, 2004a). It may tell us some very general characteristics of the political regime, but not very much about the potential for a specific movement around a specific issue at a specific time. A movement that, say, campaigns for the environment in modern

America may find the political opportunity structure fairly open, whilst a movement campaigning for abortion may find the same structure fairly closed. This is also likely to vary across states, and across time. The point is that to read action from structure, we would have to assume that the 'political opportunity structure' could be, first, pinned down and, secondly, could be said to have deterministic and uniform effects. If we cannot make these assumptions then we have a lot more studying to do before understanding how political structures relate to people's action.

Most PPT scholars would agree with this, however. Koopmans (2004) and Meyer (2004a) contend that no one in the PPT tradition actually makes such general and universal claims about the political opportunity structure or its effects. Any argument that they did has been well and truly gazumped by McAdam, Tilly and Tarrow's more recent moves away from what they call 'invariant models' of political opportunity (McAdam et al., 2001; Tilly and Tarrow, 2006; McAdam and Tarrow, 2011) and towards more contextual understandings. Rather than fixed political structures, most PPT scholars talk about the shifting aspects of political opportunities, and there is extensive discussion about the multiple and sometimes contradictory effects that factors – like state repression for example – can have on mobilization (Koopmans, 1997; Carey, 2006). Political opportunities are, in Sidney Tarrow's (1998, 89) words, 'fickle friends', which come and go, sometimes in a flash. Rather than 'windows that are either open or closed', political opportunities refer to windows that are expanding and contracting according to specific situations that arise (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004b, 12). By approaching political opportunities in this way, PPT demands a much more situation-specific understanding of them. Political opportunities structures cannot be read from political regimes, but must be studied in relation to specific circumstances.

Estellés (2011), for example, includes the 3/11 Madrid terrorist attack in the 'political opportunity structure' of the anti-war movement in Spain in 2004. The media criticism of the government response to the attacks created mass public support and provided a 'political opportunity' for the anti-war movement to succeed in its aim of getting Spanish troops to withdraw from Iraq (Estellés, 2011). What a 'political opportunity' is, therefore, depends upon the case in hand. Whilst this removes the criticism of over-generalization, however, it also renders the concept of political opportunities rather vague. Political opportunities are

what you label the favourable aspects of the external environment for the movement you are looking at, but presumably when it comes to this, everyone has their own list, and the factors involved are growing fast (Koopmans, 1999, 102). Gone is the ability to produce a list of six factors that constitute 'political opportunity' (Koopmans, 2004, 70). Karl-Dieter Opp (2009, 174) suggests that this should be the case since dimensions of the political opportunity structure should not be decided by 'a priori' lists but by empirical research.

Does the inability to create a list of the various dimensions of 'political opportunity' matter? Perhaps political opportunities are varied and the lists of factors involved as long as your arm. Perhaps they can only be deduced from the specific situations of the case in hand. If this is so, however, then some critics have argued that it is not properly accurate to link political opportunities to political 'structures'. Remember that structures exist prior to individual action and appear durable and immovable. Rootes (1999) suggests in response that PPT should narrow its agenda to these strictly structural aspects of the political environment – in other words, to the stable formal political system and its institutional arrangements. PPT should drop the other shifting, contingent, situation-specific factors from the picture. These are the result of strategic political *actions*, not political structures. With Rootes's (1999) solution, everyone would certainly know what was being talked about when 'political opportunity structure' is used, but because it remains at the general and abstract level of political regime type, there is a danger that no one would be able to do much with it. Clarity robs it of the sensitivity needed in analysis.

On the other hand, it is suggested PPT should embrace the fact that the political opportunities it is often most interested in are contingent upon strategic political action. Tarrow (1998) therefore seems to drop 'structure' from the picture to talk only of 'political opportunities' (Kurzman, 2004, 113) to ease the confusion of 'lumping', as Koopmans (2004) puts it, the structural and the shifting together. This approach has its weaknesses too, however. Critics argue that it leads to the concept being 'overstretched' (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004b, 27). As Gamson and Meyer (1996, 275) famously put it, the concept of political opportunity 'is in danger of becoming a sponge that soaks up virtually every aspect of the social movement environment'. This means that it ultimately loses its analytic utility, for if everything favourable about the world around a social movement can be labelled a 'political opportunity' then

the concept becomes virtually meaningless (Gamson and Meyer, 1996, 275; Rootes, 1999; Goodwin and Jasper, 2004b). Retaining sensitivity therefore robs the concept of clarity. Political opportunity, I suggest, is caught in a conceptual Catch-22.

This leads, ironically, on to the another criticism of the political opportunity concept: it does not cover enough (it really cannot win it seems – McAdam, 1996). When scholars started to look at the aspects of the external environment that are favourable to social movement, they began to ask why there was such a concentration on political factors (Opp, 2009, 171). The world around the social movement is not just a world of political opportunity but a world of 'cultural opportunity' (McAdam, 1996; Koopmans, 1999), 'media opportunity' (Crossley, 2006), 'socio-economic opportunity' (Mees, 2004) and 'discursive opportunity' (Koopmans and Olzak, 2004; Giugni, 2011). If we include these then we have to get rid of not only the 'structure' bit of the concept, but the 'politics' bit as well. What we are left with then is simply a world of 'opportunity' (or threat, if anyone remembers that this was part of the original picture). Even 'opportunity' is, however, problematic.

Why so? Earlier, we saw that opportunities were thought to be important by PPT theorists because they affect the calculations (or emotions) of activists in a way that suggested to them that the 'time was right' (and ripe) for collective action. What does this really mean? Are opportunities to be seen as objective cues in the external environment that activists can seize hold of or miss? (McAdam, 1996). Or, does this suggest, as some critics have argued, that opportunities are purely subjective in that they only exist when people perceive them to exist? This would equate to something like 'an opportunity not recognized is no opportunity at all' (Gamson and Meyer, 1996, 283). Or further still, do activists themselves turn unfavourable environments into opportunities for action by their own action (something suggested, at least for some movements, in Tarrow's 1998 idea of cycles of contention)? In fact, some critics argue that this more often than not is the case. Activists do not take the chances gifted by political elites, but make their own chances by using their imaginations, passion, and creativity (Jasper, 1997). It is exactly the preserve of activists, for example, to dream that there are possibilities for change that others do not think exist, and to be optimistic about the chances for success, even if others are sure that they are staring down the barrel of defeat (Gamson and Meyer, 1996, 286).

If this is true then the distinctive claim that we started out with – that social movements rely on a favourable political context in order to emerge and succeed – disappears too. 'Good riddance', argue the main critics of PPT, Goodwin and Jasper (who, in a 'Brangelina'-esque twist, are referred to in the debate as 'Jaswin') (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004c, 82). I will return to the issue of whether we should wear a t-shirt supporting Jaswin, or McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (aka 'MIT') later, but for now the debate about opportunities raises a crucial point that demands our immediate attention: how do people perceive and construct opportunities out of structural, shifting, political, or otherwise aspects of the world around them, and translate these opportunities into collective action? In order to explore this question we will turn in the next section to the 'constructionist' approach to social movements – an approach that both criticizes PPT as we have understood it here, and, it seems fair to say, is also one that most so-called 'structuralists' now adopt in some measure for themselves (Kurzman, 2004).

The world of symbolic meaning: constructionist approaches to social movements

The debate over opportunities has actually brought us back to familiar ground. In Chapter 2, I suggested that collective behaviour (CB) imparted an important lesson: people act not because of their external environment, but because of the meaning that they give to this environment. Blumer (1951 [1946]) talked, if you recall, about the constructed nature of 'social problems' and Smelser (1962) about the role that 'generalized beliefs' played in shaping people's response to structural strains. This insight, we can see, is lost in the strong version of PPT which determines people's action from the nature of external political conditions (what could properly be called a 'structuralist' position). Political structures or changes in the configuration of power in the polity may provide some new openings for social movements according to the political analyst, but whether they are opportunities for collective action depends upon how activists themselves see the situation (Flacks, 2004; Kurzman, 2004).

Thinking about how activists see the situation immerses us not in the political world as such, but in the world of symbolic meaning. We need to know about the ideas of activists, their interpretation and definition

of the situation, and the meaning that they attach to things in the world around them. It is no surprise to the sociologist therefore that constructionist approaches draw heavily upon the theory of symbolic interactionism that we encountered in Chapter 2. We saw there that symbolic interactionists urge the analyst to recognize that if people 'define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Thomas and Thomas, 1928, 572) (and presumably if they do not, then they are not). What this means is that political structures and shifts in power actually mean little *on their own* for collective action.

Despite his association with structuralism, McAdam (1982) had provided a sense of this in his study of the American civil rights movement by arguing that it was not just the existence of political opportunities that mattered, but a new way of recognizing the situation as one open to change – a 'cognitive liberation' – as he called it. McAdam (1982, 48) stated that 'mediating between opportunity and action are people and the...meanings they attach to their situations'. For mobilization to occur, activists must construct the meaning of things in ways that persuade themselves, and others, that collective action is right, necessary, and timely. The question then is how do activists construct and communicate the meaning of the world around them? This question is at the centre of constructionist approaches that point to the centrality of cultural processes in social movements.

Culture refers to the world of shared symbolic meanings out of which social action is constituted, and indeed, argue some constructionists, out of which all structures are constituted as well (Polletta, 2004). Constructionists have come up with interesting ways to explore the cultural processes of social movements in recent years as the approach has risen to ascendancy, but if we want to understand one of the main ways that scholars include cultural factors in their analysis (and the limitations of them) then we need first to examine the concept of 'cultural framing' that was introduced into the field in the mid 1980s by David Snow et al. (1986). Not only does the framing concept continue to generate research and interest (Johnston and Noakes, 2005), but it is the one aspect of cultural processes that PPT has been more than happy to take on board (McAdam et al., 1996). In fact, by the mid 1990s, PPT scholars had been so convinced by the constructionist's calls for more attention to meaning and culture that they had broadened their model of social movements to include three factors that together constitute what is often called the 'political process model' (PPM). This model for explaining the

Thomas
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Theorem

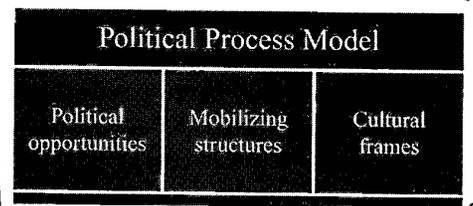


Figure 4.2

The political process model.

Source: McAdam et al. (1996).

emergence of social movements has achieved a position of dominance in social movement studies (see figure 4.2), with the factors used in combination to account for the specific case being researched.

We are already familiar with the first two factors in the political process model shown in figure 4.2: political opportunities have been discussed in the previous section, and mobilizing structures (the formal and information organizations through which resources are mobilized), in Chapter 3. Let us now turn our attention to the third.

Frames

The concept of a 'frame' comes from the work of the American sociologist Erving Goffman (1974) (whom we will revisit in Chapter 8). A frame is defined as:

an interpretative schemata that simplifies and condenses the 'world out there' by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of action within one's present or past environment.

(Snow and Benford, 1992, 137)

The idea of 'schemata' is made less abstract if we consider its definition within psychology as: 'a pattern imposed on complex reality or experience to assist in explaining it, mediate perception, or guide response' (The American Heritage Dictionary of English Language, 2000). As schemata of interpretation, frames are therefore ways of ordering experiences and events so that we can 'know' them and hence know how to react to them. It is only once the 'world out there' has been cognitively processed (mentally examined) that we can make any sense out of it. At its most basic, 'framing' therefore involves constructing the meaning of a given situation by selecting a culturally available 'frame' to put around it.