

### **Key Topics in Sociology**

Consulting Editor **John Scott**, Plymouth University

This series of textbooks surveys key topics in the study of sociology. Books cover the main theoretical and empirical aspects of each topic in a clear, concise but sophisticated style, and relate the topic to wider sociological debates. Titles are useful to undergraduates studying a first course on the topic, as well as graduates approaching the subject for the first time. Designed for ease of use, instructors may teach from individual books, or select a collection from the series for a broader sociology course.

### **Forthcoming Titles**

**Suki Ali**, *The Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*

**Kate Nash**, *The Sociology of Human Rights*

# Social Movements and Protest

**Gemma Edwards**

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  
→  
Theorem

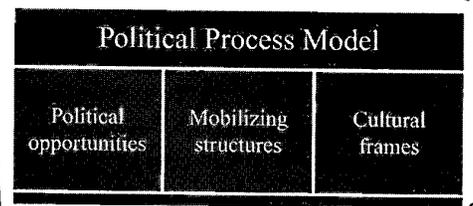


Figure 4.2

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.

Goffman (1974) makes clear that this framing process is only made obvious to us when people select the wrong frame for the situation – something exploited on 'candid camera'-type television shows where people are set up to think that serious situations are unfolding, only later to discover that they are the victims of an elaborate prank. Our amusement comes from seeing the person interpret the situation wrongly. They are misguided in thinking things are 'serious' and they look embarrassed when they realize that something very different is actually 'going on here'. In this respect, frames are more situation-specific than ideologies (which are broader systems of beliefs about the world, which colour people's interpretations of all the situations they face). Ideologies are clearly very important to how activists see the world around them. Ferree and Merrill (2000, 456) help us to appreciate the difference between frames and ideologies by suggesting that frames tell us *how* to think about things, while ideology tells us *why it matters*. Whilst ideologies cannot (and should not) be solely reduced to frames therefore (Oliver and Johnston, 2000), the frame concept can help us to unpack the process by which meanings and ideas are constructed.

When it comes to understanding the world around us, the answer to our question 'what is going on here' (Benford, 1997) is very often derived from our immediate contacts, personal experiences, and from the dominant 'frames' that are transmitted by the mass media and those with some authority. It is widely accepted in fact that the mass media play a crucial role in constructing and reproducing dominant frames of interpretation (McCarthy, 1994). These dominant frames generally include what Hirschman (1991) calls 'rhetoric of reaction' in that they produce understandings of reality that reinforce the status quo by conveying the message that you should not act to change things, it could be bad if you did, and there is probably no point in trying anyway. Social movements, on the other hand, are involved in constructing alternative frames of interpretation through 'rhetoric of change' (Gamson and Meyer, 1996, 285). They construct views of reality that convey the message that you can change things, *we* should do it now, and you will be pleased that you did. The alternative frames that social movements construct have been labelled 'collective action frames' by Snow et al. (1986), who contend that collective action frames provide a diagnosis of the situation (interpret what is going on); provide a prognosis (say what should be done about it); and provide the motivation for action (tell people why they should act).

To be persuasive to other people, collective action frames must convey ideas in a logical, convincing, and culturally resonant way. Movement activists try to find the best ways to package and present their ideas in order to get others on board (Benford, 1993a). This is an important part of the recruitment process which involves 'aligning' the frame of the movement with the ordinary, everyday frames of potential adherents – see Snow et al., 1986, who also suggest that frame alignment can be achieved by:

- frame bridging (linking two or more frames about an issue)
- frame amplification (clarifying existing beliefs and ideas within the frame)
- frame extension (broadening the issues that are important in the frame to incorporate those of a potential group of supporters)
- frame transformation (changing the frame radically or producing a new one).

Framing processes are ongoing and constantly negotiated. As Benford and Snow put it, frames are 'continuously being constituted, contested, and/or replaced during the course of social movement activity' (Benford and Snow, 2000, 628). Not only do activists dispute frames among themselves (Benford, 1993b), but movement frames must also contest official state and media frames (McCarthy, 1994).

### Methods point: frame analysis

A common research strategy for frame analysis is to conduct a 'narrative analysis' of a 'representative text'. This analysis is used to reconstruct the frame of the movement (Johnston and Noakes, 2005). This text can be the spoken discourse of activists (e.g. interview transcripts, speeches) or movement produced texts (e.g. campaign material, leaflets, position statements on websites). Researchers have also looked at media frames of protest events by using newspaper articles or the 'official frame' communicated by government sources. The idea is to try and work out the content of the frame (the key ideas) and the structure of the frame (how these ideas are organized/related together). In other words, the method is interested in what they say, and how they say it. Both these elements organize social experience in a particular way, providing a particular 'interpretative framework' for events. Studies of movement frames tend to have a comparative dimension to research which aids the analytic value of the approach.

frame alignment

★

(Johnston and Noakes, 2005). You can look at how social movement frames change over time within the same movement, linking changes in frames to the changing fortunes of the movement. Alternatively, you can compare frames across social movements within the same time period, exploring their differences and overlapping ideas, like for example, the 'rights frame' which became shared by many of the social movements of the 1960s (civil rights, women's rights, gay rights, and so on). Social movement frames can also be compared with the 'official' framing attempts of the media, to explore the nature of the contest between the two.

- Select a representative text of a social movement that interests you. Follow Johnston and Noakes's (2005) method of recreating the frame by looking for:
  - the key issue in the frame
  - responsibility/solution proposed in the frame (diagnosis and prognosis)
  - the symbols used, like visual images, metaphors, historical examples, stereotypes, slogans
  - the supporting arguments, especially about the historical roots of grievances and appeals to wider cultural values.
- Do you think that frame analysis is a useful method of social movement research?

### The media and framing

The media – newspapers, radio, television, and social media – are central to how the public sees the world around them. Media, in fact, are central to people's perception of their environment and the 'political opportunities' that it affords. Roscigno and Danaher (2001), for example, show how the political messages communicated via radio played an important role in the mobilization of textile workers in the south of the United States in the early 1930s, when thousands went out on strike. They suggest that radio affected mill workers' sense of collective identity, solidarity, and their perceptions of a 'political opportunity' to further their interests (Roscigno and Danaher, 2001). It is also the case, therefore, that if activists want to influence public perception then they inevitably have to engage with the media and shape the messages that are communicated. In other words, they must get their stories told and their ideas heard.

This often requires a conscious media strategy (Ryan, 1991). To get coverage, movements are at the mercy not only of the corporate and political interests shown to lie behind news corporations, but the journalist's requirement for stories that are 'newsworthy' (McCarthy et al., 1996, 297). The mass media have only a little space left to fill with extras (the 'news hole') and they select issues that fit the bill of a 'good story' – essentially, something that will grab the audience's interest (McCarthy et al., 1996). Good stories are dramatic spectacles, big important events, heart-rending tales of woe and adversity – which are all the better for a few famous faces, cute children, good-looking leaders, and innocent victims (McCarthy et al., 1996, 297). This means that the mass media tend to concentrate attention on the more violent protests. As Gamson and Meyer (1996, 288) put it, 'burning buildings and burning fires make better Television than peaceful vigils and orderly marches'. The mass media therefore tend to cover protest events if they are sensational, violent, emotive, celebrity-endorsed, and full of activist 'personalities'.

Whilst mass media attention can affect public perceptions of opportunity and bring vital resources to a movement (giving it the public status of an 'important player' on the issue) (McCarthy et al., 1996), the kind of attention bestowed may not be conducive to the movement's reputation, as found by the feminist group Riot Grrrl in the early 1990s. The mass media misconstrued aspects of the group and failed to give serious treatment to the issues it raised, like rape and abortion. Corin Tucker of the Riot Grrrl band Sleater-Kinney said that 'I think it was deliberate that we were made to look like we were just ridiculous girls parading around in our underwear.' As a consequence, the group refused to court the mainstream media at all, communicating through underground zines. Perhaps today the Riot Grrrl group would have spread their message via social media instead (Marcus, 2010). In this respect, new media have become a crucial platform not only for battles between movements and countermovements (discussed in the last chapter in the case of the internet feud between Anonymous and Scientology), but in providing activist-created media content that gives them journalistic control over the message, and a way to quickly diffuse their chosen frame to millions of users on sites like YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and tumblr. Castells et al. claim for example that mobile communication (enabled by mobile phones and

activity

★

7/5

Riot  
Grrrl

wireless networks) allows for a form of autonomous and personalized communication which, as they put it, 'effectively bypasses the mass-media system as a source of information, and creates a new form of public space' (Castells et al., 2006, 185). We will return to the role played by new media in Chapter 6.

### Case point: the media framing of drunk-driving

Symbolic contests with the media are crucial in the ability of movements to communicate what Gamson calls 'injustice' frames (1992). To some extent, all movements are rooted in an interpretation of some aspect of the world around them as 'unjust' and in need of collective action. John McCarthy (1994) provides a useful example of how an injustice frame came to be constructed around drunk-driving in the United States in the 1980s. Unlike today, drunk-driving in 1970s America was predominantly framed in terms of road traffic accidents and led to calls for better road safety. Individual agitators (like mothers who had had a child killed by a drunk driver) had tried to alter this interpretation to suggest that drunk-driving was a crime, with real victims, and should be publicly recognized as such. In the 1970s, this interpretation failed to resonate with the public's perception of the issue. In the 1980s however, there was a shift from what McCarthy calls the 'auto safety' frame to the 'killer drunk' frame. The 'killer drunk' frame enabled hundreds of anti-drunk-driving groups – like Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) – to mobilize around the injustice by the mid 1980s. Interestingly, McCarthy shows how the media in this case played a key role in *enabling* rather than disputing the collective action frame by helping it to gain popular attention and appeal. The movement found it relatively easy to gain sympathetic media coverage because the stories of 'angry' 'mothers' who wanted to tell about the innocent child 'victims' of 'murdering' 'drunks' fulfilled the media's requirements for a 'good story'. The state authorities were also important to the framing effort, appearing on news broadcasts as 'experts' whose knowledge about the issue supported the activists' position.

MADD

- In what ways can mass media coverage hinder a social movement? In what ways could it help?
- What tactics could movements employ to challenge media frames?

### Narrative and dramaturgy

Movements construct meanings not only through their texts, but through the stories that they tell and things that they do. Polletta (1998) for example points to the importance of narrative story-telling to the way in which social movements create understandings about what they are doing and why it came about. McAdam (1996) argues that movements also create meanings through the events they stage because 'actions really *do* speak louder than words'. Protest can be seen as a kind of drama, being played out before the eyes of the on-looking audience. This aspect of movement activity has been referred to as 'dramaturgy' (Benford and Hunt, 1992). McAdam (1996) argues that Martin Luther King was particularly skilled at using tactics to produce dramatic events in the American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. King adeptly employed tactics of peaceful protest in the face of violent reprisals from authorities, the images of which not only hit the front pages, but in themselves conveyed a sense of good, Christian Americans being persecuted by evil, violent racists.

The Israeli-Jewish group Women in Black provides another cogent example of dramaturgy. Every Friday between 1 pm and 2 pm, forty-plus women gather in a public square in Jerusalem, dressed in black to symbolize the tragedy of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They take up a position on a stage and remain there, silent. No words or great ideological statements are used to convey the message – just their presence in a public space usually dominated by men, wearing black to 'flaunt what is usually private grief. It was their silence, in fact, that 'compelled people to listen' to their anti-occupation message (Sasson-Levy and Rapoport, 2003, 385).

### Framing and the political process model assessed

The concept of 'cultural framing' is primarily employed therefore to examine the process by which meanings are constructed and

strategically communicated by social movements. PPT scholars adopt the concept as a kind of necessary supplement to the political opportunity approach. If the existence of political opportunities depends upon people 'defining' them as real in the first place, then attention must be given to how activists see the world around them. To this extent, the constructionists have won the day. Protest as a meaningful response to the structural conditions that people face, has to be socially constructed by them.

Cultural framing is used therefore as a device that can point to the cultural processes of meaning construction that 'mediate' between objective structural conditions on the one hand, and the action of social movements on the other. In other words, as McAdam and Tarrow put it, culture mediates between structure and agency (McAdam and Tarrow, 2011). No wonder then that PPT scholars so often reject the label of 'structuralism' (Tarrow, 2004). As Kurzman (2004) points out, there appear to be no self-confessed structuralists left in twenty-first century social movement theory.

Despite embracing what is called the 'cultural turn' in social movement studies (a cultural turn that was happening elsewhere in social theory from the mid 1990s), the political process model with its three key factors of political opportunities, cultural frames, and mobilizing structures (see figure 4.2) still came in for a great deal of criticism, both internally (from MIT themselves), and from more staunch constructionists like Jaswin. We will come on the MIT's self-criticism in the next section, but for now let us concentrate on the enemy from outside. This makes for lively reading. Jaswin's critique of PPT earned them the reputation of 'theory bashers', who have since taken their fair share of bashing in return (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004a). Much of this theory-bashing takes place in a Symposium on PPT in the journal *Sociological Forum* (19(1), 1999), and a later book that extended the debate, *Rethinking Social Movements* (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004a). Here, Jaswin accuses the political process model of an innate 'structuralist bias' in its approach to social movements, despite the inclusion of cultural framing. What are their main arguments?

First, Jaswin contend that retaining the concept of 'political opportunities' still suggests that activists rely upon some favourable external context in order to mobilize and succeed (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004b). It is clear, in their view, that this is not the case. Activists are not

Structuralist bias

the puppets of structures, but themselves pull the strings. They do this first by using the emotional force of their moral arguments, something entirely overlooked by the rational actor model underlying PPM, which concentrates upon 'cold cognition' rather than 'hot' emotion (Ferreer and Merrill, 2000). If activists are indeed the emotional actors I professed in the last chapter, then actually their passion can take them further than political opportunities can. In her study of the AIDs activist group ACT-UP, Deborah Gould (2004; 2009), for example, found that AIDs activism was at its height in the US exactly when political opportunities were contracting (D. Gould, 2004, 164). Legal changes that contracted the rights of homosexuals at a time when the suffering of the AIDs crisis was so great created an emotional outpouring of anger and grief that drove people on to the streets in spite of - indeed *because of* - unfavourable political conditions.

Secondly, Jaswin argue that activists produce their own opportunities through their creative strategies (Jasper, 1997). It is wrong to see interpretative processes as mediating between objective political opportunities 'out there' and people's action, because people are, in fact, the sole creators of opportunities in the first place. Opportunities are entirely culturally constructed by the meaning-making processes of activists. They are not products of an external world around a social movement which frames render meaningful. To think otherwise is to retain a structuralist bias - namely a belief that people's actions are being determined by forces that lie outside their own control. Similarly, when PPM talks of 'mobilizing structures', such as networks, they are also viewed with a structuralist bias. Networks for example are seen primarily as pre-existing webs of relationships that structurally connect individuals to movements, without acknowledging that they only really matter because of their cultural contents, like ideas and emotions (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004b, 17). Again, emotions can compensate not just for a lack of political opportunity, but a lack of pre-existing structural connections too. Jasper, for example, argues that animal rights activists are not recruited through social networks but through 'moral shocks', which can be thought of as affronts to their moral sensibilities, which fill them with disgust and anger about the abuse of animals and motivate them to act.

Jaswin are right to criticize the rationalist bias in PPM. It is a bias that creates big problems with the framing concept. The framing

(2) rationalist bias

emotions

concept suggests that activists strategically select and package together cultural symbols and ideas to manipulate potential recruits. This is a very 'voluntaristic' view of culture, as many critics have pointed out (Hart, 1996; Steinberg, 1999; Ferree and Merrill, 2000; Polletta, 2004). The voluntaristic view of culture sees culture as like any other *resource* that can be picked up and used by a rational actor to achieve their goals (Steinberg, 1999). Rational activists select and order ideas so that they can create the most convincing arguments. This however, is criticized as a very 'top down' way of thinking about the importance of ideas, where meanings are communicated to potential adherents in order to manipulate them into participation (Ferree and Merrill, 2000, 457), but how far can actors consciously put together schematic maps of their ideas as if they were devising a conscious PR strategy?

Steinberg (1999) offers an alternative to the framing approach which he terms a 'dialogic approach' in which meanings are constructed not like PR strategies, but in ongoing processes of social communication. For Steinberg, society consists of dominant discourses (powerful and accepted ways of talking about and thinking about things), and social movements, like anyone else, operate within these discourses. Whilst activists make efforts to subvert the dominant discourse and represent the world in a different way, they are nevertheless embedded themselves within the discourse and can only employ the categories and ideas that it provides (in other words, people cannot 'say the unsayable').

It is not the case therefore that activists can cherry-pick from different ideas and meanings at will - selecting and repackaging cultural symbols until they have the desired effect. Instead, Steinberg calls for a 'relational approach to meaning production' that sees the struggles around the production of meaning as part and parcel of social interaction between challengers, publics, and elites. This social interaction is the key to what Hart (1996, 91) calls 'culture-making practices' which are not simply about receiving a certain picture of reality (from a text for example) and assimilating the values and ideas it involves as an individual but, along *with others*, discussing, debating, challenging, and modifying discourses so that new collective understandings emerge:

Only when we see cultural processes as part of the action, as part of what is quintessential both in formation and at stake, can we fully appreciate the cultural dimension of collective action.

(Steinberg, 1999, 772)

Steinberg  
dialogic  
approach

Steinberg's argument reminds us that culture is not just about agency. It is not a tool used by activists to package meanings in ways that create commitment from individuals, but it is part of the wider social context in which framing processes take place. As Hart (1996, 94) puts it, 'culture is at least as often a source of constraint as of agency'. Where Jaswin are wrong then is in breaking from structuralism altogether. Instead, as Polletta (2004) argues, what is needed is an appreciation of the cultural dimensions of structures that render culture also as something that exists prior to people's actions, and appears to them as relatively durable and immovable. Jaswin, like frame theorists, come too close at times to suggesting that culture is individual consciousness - namely, the ideas and meanings that exist in individual people's heads and enable them to act creatively (Tilly, 2004). As Polletta puts it, however, 'culture is not just in your head' (Polletta, 2004). Culture is part of structures too (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Polletta, 2004, 97). Culture is the shared traditions that shape the nation state and its interactions with social movements (e.g. through the culture of political institutions, and the culture of policing (see Della Porta and Reiter, 1998)), and it is the 'collective memories' of past contention that shape current norms and practices.

It would be unfair to suggest that PPT had not considered culture as a constraining variable in this way at all. Tilly (1995) for example offered the concept of 'repertoires of contention', which refers to the way in which collective actors make claims (e.g. through street demonstrations, strikes, sit-ins, internet methods and so forth). The repertoire that movement activists employ is largely inherited from previous generations of struggle, which pass on a collection of culturally, and historically specific tactics and strategies from which to draw. Tilly states that 'repertoires of contention' is meant as:

a cultural notion where you have collective learning going on through interaction and you have the residues of this historical process of struggle showing up as constraint on how people relate to each other next time they make claims.

(Tilly, 1998, 203)

Although activists can play with the repertoires they inherit and come up with innovations, Tilly and Tarrow (2006) argue that modern protest movements have drawn upon what they call 'modular performances when making claims, including demonstrations, petitions, and, increasingly today, internet-based methods.'

★  
theory  
integration

★ If 'culture is not just in your head' (Polletta, 2004) then it should also warn us of another fallacy – emotions are not just in your heart. Emotions are also part of a wider culture that patterns the sentiments of a nation or group at a particular historical juncture. Emotion cultures for example, provide rules about feelings – what is appropriate and not, what is morally wrong and how you should feel about it. Shifts in emotion cultures can help explain the mobilization and success of social movements too. In his study of the anti-slavery movement, for example, Michael Young (2001) argues that a shift in the emotional culture surrounding slavery – from knowing it was wrong to *feeling* that it was wrong (because white people increasingly came into contact with black people) – enabled the anti-slavery movement to gain important middle-class allies that eventually led to success.

Despite Jaswin forwarding some valid criticisms of PPM, the idea of structures being important in shaping activist choices and strategies cannot be pushed aside. Hold off from buying your Jaswin t-shirt just yet. As McAdam (2004) continues to stress, structures place some limits upon the range of interpretations people can make. But these limits must be seen, as Polletta (2004) argues, not just as the products of political structures but as the products of their symbolic, cultural dimensions too. Culture, as well as politics, is responsible for creating an apparently-immovable context outside activists' control. Jaswin would not disagree, when they claim that they are not arguing that action does not take place in what they call 'structured arenas' (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004b). The key question then is how can we best think of these 'structured arenas' in order to do justice to constraint and agency, structure and culture?

I suggest that we can best think of the 'structured arenas' in which social movements operate by employing the concept of 'relational fields'. Jack Goldstone (2004) for example calls for the concept of 'political opportunity structure' (POS) to be replaced by that of 'external relational fields'; a concept he sees better able to capture what POS was meant to designate (Goldstone, 2004, 356). A 'relational field' can be thought of as a space created by the interactions of actors and groups around a particular issue. There are fields composed of political elites, state actors, media actors, and corporate actors. What happens in these external fields and how they interact with social movement networks affects the fortunes of movements. Crossley (2005; 2006) for example understands movements themselves as 'fields of contention' (cultural

and material spaces of contention populated by SMOs and structured by their interactions), and they are shaped in their interaction with external fields. He shows how the psychiatric field of contention was shaped by interactions with the mental health field, legal field, parliamentary field, and media field (Crossley 2005; 2006). Steinberg (1999) would add to this the 'discursive field' – namely the dominant cultural discourses that social movements work within which are constructed through the ongoing social interactions between movements and other players (elite actors, media and so on) and lead to the social production of meanings. The nature of these discursive fields can play an important role in movement success (Giugni, 2011).

The concept of 'external relational fields' therefore covers the aspects of the external environment that the POS concept had been referring to (Goldstone, 2004, 356). It stresses not structure, however, but interaction. Fields are the spaces in which strategic interactions between movements and other players take place. This means that rather than being stable, fixed, and outside the control of actors, the environment in which movements act is actually shifting all the time (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004b, 12).

### Contentious politics (CP): developments in PPT

In the previous section, we explored the criticism of PPT that came from outside. Whilst this debate was raging, however, MTT were also reflecting upon, and critiquing, themselves (McAdam et al., 2001). They accepted the cultural turn and much of the constructionist critique of PPT. They accepted that the concept of 'political opportunity structure' had led to analyses that were static rather than dynamic; that cultural processes has been unduly limited to framing processes, and that not enough emphasis had been placed upon the fact that opportunities and threats have to be socially attributed (interpreted by people), and mobilizing structures socially appropriated (actively used by people). There was no longer point in debating whether the rationalists, structuralists, or culturalists were right, or whether they should be combined in this way or that (McAdam et al., 2001). Instead we should all move on to an approach that puts dynamic, interactive processes at its core, an approach which is, fundamentally, 'relational'. In order to do this, MTT suggested a radical break with what they called the 'classic social

movement agenda' of political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and cultural framing. They replaced it instead with the 'contentious politics' approach. This approach was presented in *Dynamics of Contention* (McAdam et al., 2001), *Silence and Voice* (Aminzade et al., 2001), and *Contentious Politics* (Tilly and Tarrow, 2006; Tarrow and Tilly, 2009).

CP  
1)

The contentious politics (CP) approach is new in two key respects. First, it included a much broader range of political contention than is covered by the label 'social movements'. MTT argued that the study of social movements had become unnecessarily divorced from the study of revolutions, rebellions, civil wars, industrial conflict, ethnic conflicts, nationalism, democratization, and even elections (on elections, see McAdam and Tarrow, 2012). By concentrating not on social movements, but on the 'contentious episodes' of claim-making between challengers and the state that constitute all of these, MTT hoped to reunite social movement studies with other disciplines that studied similar processes, and move beyond an undue emphasis upon the historically particular form of the 'social movement'. Contentious politics are:

contentious in the sense that they involve the collective making of claims that, if realized, would conflict with someone else's interests; politics in the sense that governments of one sort or another figure in the claim making, whether as claimants, objects of claims, allies of the objects, or monitors of the contention.

(Tarrow and Tilly, 2009, 438)

2)

Secondly, CP adopted a different methodology for studying contentious episodes. Rejecting the 'invariant' models they had been accused of inventing (i.e. universal lists of conditions that scholars sought to correlate with their cases), MTT abandoned overarching grand explanations (McAdam et al., 2001). They argued instead that scholars should look to unearth the processes that shape social movement mobilization and dynamics, and, further, break these processes down into the mechanisms that cause them. CP argues that scholars should study mechanisms and processes involved in particular contentious episodes. Thus in *Dynamics of Contention*, MTT highlight a range of mechanisms including: brokerage, diffusion, polarization, repression, and radicalization, that have been found to play a role in contentious episodes from the French Revolution to South African anti-apartheid, to the Mau-Mau revolt and Swiss unification (in fact they take fifteen cases and explore the common mechanisms they contain by taking paired

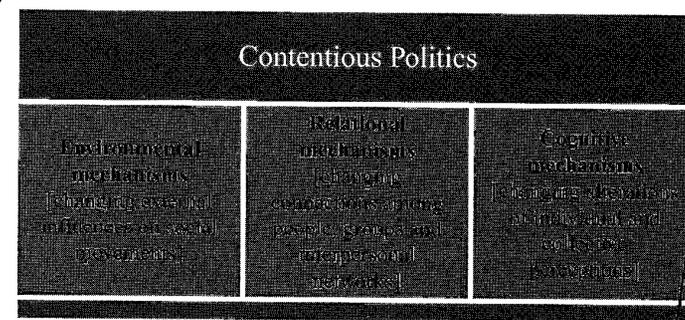


Figure 4.3

The mechanisms of contentious politics.

Source: adapted from McAdam et al. (2001).

comparisons of them) (McAdam et al., 2001, 76). There is a shift away, then, from looking at the three main factors in the political process model (see figure 4.2) as 'conditions' that should be 'correlated' with social movement activity, and towards looking at *processes* and *mechanisms* instead. The mechanisms are divided into three categories which we can see as loosely mapping on to those of the political process model (see figure 4.3). We will put some of these mechanisms to work in Chapter 6 in our explanation of global contentious politics.

*Dynamics of Contention* (McAdam et al., 2001) concentrated most of its efforts on relational mechanisms, leading to accusations that MTT retain a structuralist bias in the CP approach (Platt, 2004). This is undeserved considering that instead they see culture as a key part of all three of the mechanisms, especially the relational ones: 'if we did not invoke "culture" as a master variable, it was in part because we are suspicious of master variables and think of culture as being embedded in the relations among actors' (McAdam and Tarrow 2011, 6). So why was CP not seen as a resounding success? First, like PPT before it, CP contains an obvious *political* bias. The definition of contentious politics, for example, shows that it is premised upon contentious episodes that in some way involve the government. MTT (2001), and later McAdam and Tarrow (2011) acknowledge this 'statist' bias. While interactions between challengers and the state may well be central to a broad range of social movements, it is not to all of them. It is likely, for example, that CP, like PPT before it, will not apply well to movements who challenge cultural norms more generally and therefore take a counter-cultural rather than political form (we will look at these

movements in Chapter 5) (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004b). Placing the state central to the picture is also problematic with the proliferation of movements who challenge corporations rather than nation states (Soule, 2009) (and we will pick this up in Chapter 6). Finally, Giugni (2011) argues that in non-Western contexts social movements have a different relationship to the state because there is not such a clear distinction between the state and civil society. In non-Western contexts therefore, social movements work more closely with the state and it is not as useful to think of social movements as external 'opponents' (see also, Goldstone, 2004).

Secondly, despite arguing on the one hand for a move away from overarching universal theories, some critics suggest that what CP gave us was another one in different clothes, which pulls out common causal mechanisms across an increasingly broad range of contention, even though they have different combinations and effects. In fact, because it engages with such a broad range and pulls out such a long list of mechanisms related to each, critics complain that it is unwieldy and unclear, again something that MTT admit. In wanting to integrate everything in a way that applied to everything (not only social movements but all episodes of contention), the CP agenda became squeezed of analytical interest as scholars drowned under the detail and yet also seemed to emerge on the surface with the kind of universal theory that they had wanted to get away from. Perhaps the most significant point we can take from the criticism that surrounds CP is captured by Ludger Mees: 'the search for an all-explaining general theory of contentious politics is something similar to the search of the Holy Grail: noble, but futile' (Mees, 2004, 328).

## Summary

This chapter has critically engaged with political process theory. PPT argues that:

- RMT places too much emphasis on factors internal to social movements, like their organizational structure. The mobilization and success of social movements depends instead on external factors in the world around a social movement.
- The most important factors that are linked to social movement mobilization and success are political ones. The nation state and its political institutions are central to the opportunities for social movement mobilization. The

relationship between movements and this political context can be examined using the concept of 'political opportunity structure'.

- PPT largely accepts, however, that political opportunities are a matter of activists' perception – their existence depends upon how activists define the world around them. The concept of cultural framing is therefore a necessary complement to that of political opportunities. Together with mobilizing resources, political opportunities and cultural frames constitute the 'political process model' of collective action (see figure 4.2).

If you scour social movement journals today, the continuing hold of the political process model is clear to see. Much research still adheres to MTT's description of a study which examines the ways in which their case 'fits the boxes' of political opportunities, mobilizing resources, and cultural frames, and then broadens the boxes to accommodate an increasing array of nuances thrown up by the case in hand (McAdam et al., 2001). This is perhaps because the single-case-study approach is still largely dominant in research, and fits better with this model than with the search for mechanisms, which requires large-scale paired comparisons (Mees, 2004). Where comparisons are used today, they tend to stay within the language of political opportunity structures, or cycles of contention (Jung, 2010). This is not to say that the mechanisms approach has made no impact (see *Mobilization* Special Issue, 2011). It seems to be particularly welcome as a way to move analysis from static variables to *mechanisms and processes*, urging the political process theorists to 'live up to their name' as Jaswin put it (Goodwin and Jasper, 2004b, 29).

Let us end, then, with some wider critical reflection. Rationalist, culturalist, and structuralist analyses, I suggest, are all moving in the *relational* direction that we first started to unpack in Chapter 3:

- The rationalists, as we saw last chapter, actually moved fairly quickly away from individual-level explanations of decision-making to a consideration of the relational context in which choices are made and strategies formed.
- Culturalists, as we have seen in this chapter, are also feeling the heat of criticism when it comes to overly individualist analyses of meaning and consciousness that place culture and emotion in people's heads and hearts rather than seeing them as woven into the very fabric of social relations.
- The so-called 'structuralists', with whom we started this chapter, have also driven forward the relational turn in their CP approach in which they see the actors, identities, and trajectories involved in contentious episodes as the ongoing products of the interaction between them. Gone is the image of an already constituted challenger opposing an already constituted nation state. Such an image is nothing but a static snapshot of a much bigger interactive process involving the both of them.

The world around a social movement is, then, no static place. It is no fixed place that lies outside social action and determines it. If this was the picture of structure that you started out with then it is well and truly gone. The world around a social movement is not some puppet-master that crafts its fortunes as suggested in the strong version of PPT (not that we could put anybody's name to it). Neither is it the invention of pure consciousness in which individuals can dream that literally anything is possible. Instead, the world around a social movement – like the social movement itself – can be thought of as a series of external relational fields (political, media, corporate, discursive), constituted by interaction, and which also interact with one another (Goldstone, 2004). These are the 'structured arenas' of action that Jaswin (2004b) talk about – and they place material, political, and symbolic boundaries around that action (Crossley 2005; 2006). The social interaction between the different players and fields, however, means that boundaries are always being negotiated, and possibilities for action always shifting. Structures have to be reproduced by action, and action, therefore, always has a chance to change them. Perhaps the key problem with the CP approach is that despite the relational turn, the mechanistic language employed still fails to resonate with this picture of agency. It is in relational processes that chances are made, and so too are the actors who will seize or thwart them.

We have not yet, however, given attention to this last question – which is made central by both culturalist and relational approaches – where do the 'social actors' implicated in various contentious episodes come from? To address this, we need to approach the issue of culture and social movements through a different lens – that of European NSM theory.

### DISCUSSION POINT

- What influence does the national political regime have on social movement mobilization? Does the nation state always play a role in social movement fortunes?
- Can social movements emerge even if the political environment they face is repressive and unfavourable?
- Do opportunities for collective action only exist if people perceive them to exist?
- Why is 'framing' an important activity for social movements? Is this the only way, or the best way, to consider the role played by culture in movement mobilization?

### FURTHER READING

For the work of MTT separately see: Charles Tilly's *From Mobilization to Revolution* (1978); Doug McAdam's *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency* (1982); and Sidney Tarrow's *Power in Movement* (1998). Doug McAdam et al.'s *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements* (1996) presents the political process model's three concepts of mobilizing structures, political opportunities, and cultural frames. The CP approach is outlined in Doug McAdam et al.'s *Dynamics of Contention* (2001), and Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow's *Contentious Politics* (2006). For the lively constructionist critique of PPT see Jeff Goodwin and James Jasper's edited collection of the debate *Rethinking Social Movements* (2004a).