



PROTEST AND DEMOCRACY

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How Do We Explain Protest? Social Science, Grievances, and the Puzzle of Collective Action

Erica S. Simmons

How and why social movements emerge, develop, strengthen, and fade has long intrigued social science scholars.¹ In particular, three frameworks have emerged that dominate the social movement literature: resource mobilization, political opportunity, and the framing process (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996, 7). They are now largely understood to constitute one approach—the political process model (e.g., see Piven and Cloward 1977; McAdam 1982). Even as the dynamics of protest shift in the face of marketization, globalization, and rising democratization and inequality, questions about why people protest continue to return to the core tenants of political process theory. Many current explanations for protest either seek to refine and further specify how and when we might expect to see particular elements of the political process model at work, or to encourage scholars to push the model towards increased interactivity and attention to social construction (e.g., McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). The question remains, however, whether we are theoretically equipped to explain protest in what Arce and Rice in chapter 1 of this volume call “the era of free markets and democracy.”

This chapter offers an overview of contemporary theorizing on social movements, focusing largely on the political process model and the

contributions made by scholarship tied to the “cultural turn.”² The chapter is divided into four sections. The first section introduces social movement theorizing that emphasized “strains” or “breakdowns.” The second section turns to the political process model and outlines both its central components and a number of contemporary critiques. The chapter then addresses the “cultural turn” in social movement theory and offers the broad contours of its central contributions. The chapter concludes by proposing that scholars would do well, once again, to pay attention to the content of a movement’s claims. By focusing on the claims that people make when they protest—the grievances at the core of a movement—we enhance our answers to old questions and suggest new avenues for future research.

Strains and Breakdowns: Early Theorizing on Social Movements

Early approaches to theorizing social movements are heavily rooted in the idea that rapid social transformations would lead to intense periods of collective action (Smelser 1963). Scholars developed variations on the general theory, focusing on “strains” or “breakdowns.”³ Davies (1962; 1969) advocated for the power of the “J-curve of rising expectations” (1962, 14). He argued that revolutions are most likely when long periods of economic and social development are followed by a quick downturn. If expectations form in response to perceptions that conditions are improving and they instead decline quickly, revolution will result. Building on Davies’s emphasis on expectations and “state of mind,” Geschwender (1968) proposed a more general theory, one applicable to social movements as well as revolutions, arguing that conflicting perceptions of social and economic reality could help explain the rise of the civil rights movement. Black Americans had experienced rising living standards throughout the 1930s and ’40s only to find “the doors closed as tightly as ever” (Geschwender 1968, 134) at the close of the Second World War. Gurr (1970) followed closely on Davies’s and Geschwender’s heels when he enjoined scholars to focus on relative deprivation, arguing that collective action could be explained by the intensity with which deprivation is experienced. In these accounts, social movements are largely seen as reactive to social crises and can be

explained by attention to individual cognitive processes or breakdowns in social relationships.

Critiques of breakdown, strain, or relative deprivation approaches abound (e.g., McCarthy and Zald 1977; McAdam 1999; Tilly, Tilly, and Tilly 1975). The “constancy of discontent,” as McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1988) call it, is at the core of many objections to grievance-centered approaches.⁴ Tarrow offers a clear articulation of this line of reasoning: “Even a cursory look at modern history shows that outbreaks of collective action cannot be derived from the level of deprivation that people suffer or from the disorganization of their societies; for these preconditions are more constant than the movements they supposedly cause” (1998, 81). In short, grievances exist everywhere but we do not always see social movements emerge to address them. While some defenders continued to voice support for strain or breakdown theories (e.g., Piven and Cloward 1992), the idea that grievances consistently outnumber social movements, and therefore cannot provide the variation necessary for a convincing explanation, has gone largely uncontested. Indeed, by the late 1990s, it appeared as though the heavy criticism of grievance-centered approaches had relegated them to “the dustbin of failed social science theories” (Snow et al. 1998, 2).

The Political Process Model

With the rise of the political process model, social movement theory took a sharp and decisive turn away from grievances. Proponents of a political process approach focused not on the claims movements made, but rather on the context in which they operated; the “world outside a social movement” became key to understanding movement dynamics (Meyer 2004, 126). Resource mobilization and political opportunity approaches emerged first (e.g., Eisinger 1973; Tilly 1978; McCarthy and Zald 1977; McAdam 1982), with frames (Snow et al. 1986) quickly on their heels. While all three are now often understood to be part and parcel of the political process model, it is useful to start by taking each in turn.

For resource mobilization theorists, the rise of a movement can be understood with reference to resources external to the movement organization as well as the movement’s organizational structure itself (McAdam,

McCarthy, and Zald 1996, 7). McAdam defines the resources and structures relevant to this approach as “those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action” (1999, xi). Organizations, financial resources, and connective structures (networks, relationships, etc.) are treated as critical ingredients in a social movement’s ability to organize. The resource mobilization approach challenges scholars of social movement emergence to understand the importance of mobilization processes to sustained collective action. The result is a “focus on [the] groups, organizations, and informal networks that comprise the collective building blocks of social movements” (McAdam 1999, ix).

Attention to the resources available to movements has improved our understanding of the dynamics and trajectories of important moments of political protest. For example, Clemens (1997) shows how the associations women made through clubs, parlor meetings, and charitable organizations served as critical foundations to social-reform movements in the early twentieth century. My own research in Cochabamba, Bolivia, details how activists drew on strong networks of neighborhood associations, unions, and irrigator organizations to recruit participants for the water wars in the winter and spring of 2000 (Simmons 2016c). Without the relationships formed and cultivated through these kinds of associations, both the social-reform movement in the United States and the movement against water privatization in Bolivia may never have gotten off the ground. Wickham-Crowley (1992) shows how the concept is useful not only for understanding peaceful social movements, but efforts at armed resistance as well. We cannot, he argues, explain the success of guerrilla movements in Latin America without taking into account access to military equipment. Here, Wickham-Crowley draws our attention not to organizational networks, but rather to material resources. More recently, we can point to the ways in which social media served as a mobilizing structure for the Egyptian protests of 2011 (see Gerbaudo 2012; Kingston, chapter 6 in this volume). While we should not treat social media as an agent that acts independently of the activists and social movement participants that use them, we should nonetheless understand them as tools for social mobilization.

Although attention to mobilizing structures and resources has added much to our understandings of social movements, the concept has not gone without critique. Goodwin and Jasper note that the definition is so broad that “no analyst could possibly *fail* to uncover one or another mobilizing structure ‘behind’ or ‘within’ a social movement. . . . The concept thus begs the question of how and when certain of these ‘structures,’ but not others, actually facilitate collective protest” (2004b, 20). McAdam, Tilly, and Tarrow argue that resource mobilization approaches “exaggerate the centrality of deliberate decisions” and “downplay the contingency, emotionality, plasticity, and interactive character of movement politics” (2001, 15). Some scholars have worked to further define and specify the types of resources available to movements, and how they might work to help explain social movement dynamics and trajectories. Most recently, Edwards and McCarthy (2004) have developed a typology of social movement resources, outlining the importance of what they call moral, cultural, social-organizational, human, and material resources.⁵

Yet challenges with the concept remain. First, it is not always clear whether a particular mobilizing structure helps to build or undermine a movement—the same structure could work both ways depending on the context (e.g., see Cloward and Piven 1984). Strong organizations can work to build a movement just as easily as they can undermine the movement’s ability to achieve its goals by making the movement available for co-optation. Second, movements may capitalize on existing structures or networks, but they can also consciously and purposefully build their own. Returning to the example of the Bolivian water wars mentioned above, while activists drew on powerful preexisting local networks throughout the protests, the most important organization in the movement’s growth, a multisector association called the Coordinator for Water and Life, was a product of the movement itself. Attention to political opportunity structures, the next approach outlined below, does not address these particular flaws in resource mobilization theories, but it does begin to draw scholars’ attention to the context in which a movement operates.

As its name suggests, the political opportunities approach focuses on changes in political opportunities (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996, 7). When scholars look to political opportunities to help explain social movement dynamics, they are usually looking at large-scale changes that

create openings or windows to which a movement can respond. Specifically, scholars may look to “changes in the institutional structure or informal power relations of a given national political system,” or “differences in the political characteristics of the nation states in which [movements] are embedded,” to explain movement emergence (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996, 3). Political opportunity theorists remind scholars that political context and long-term processes can be critical to understanding variation in social movements across geography and time.

Political context can advantage some claims, close off possibilities for others, make some strategies more attractive or successful, and influence who participates in protest politics and how. McAdam’s (1982) emphasis on newly enfranchised northern black voters as an important causal factor in the emergence of the civil rights movement offers a classic example of how political opportunities shape movement emergence. With more black voters to appease, northern politicians began to see support for civil rights legislation as potentially working to their advantage. As politicians responded to and advocated for the movement’s claims, the movement was able to grow. Political opportunities may also emerge out of specific events. The shooting at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, in December 2012 arguably created a political opportunity for the gun-control movement in the United States, as many American citizens expressed an interest in stricter gun measures in the wake of the violence. The possibilities for what can work as a “political opportunity” are seemingly endless. The concept can refer to everything from formal domestic political institutions to the international context to economic or social cleavages.

However, political opportunity scholars often fail to describe exactly which kinds of change will be most conducive to contentious political action. Scholars who emphasize political opportunities rarely suggest causal trends or hypothesize that a certain change in political opportunity structure will have a similar effect on a variety of social movements.⁶ Instead, scholars often show how particular political opportunities work in particular moments without theorizing how they might work in a different time or place. Among scholars who use the concept, a debate rages over whether expanding or contracting structures are most conducive to mobilization (McAdam 1982; 1999, xi). This distinction offers limited leverage for scholars seeking to better understand the mechanisms and

processes at work. Furthermore, it introduces ambiguous terminology into an already poorly defined debate. An “opportunity” in some circumstances might be a constraint in others. One need only consider the impact of repression on protest politics to understand how context-dependent the concept of “political opportunity” is. The threat of violence against members of the opposition arguably helped to keep many Chileans at home during the early years of the Pinochet dictatorship, while perceived acts of repression during the Bolivian water wars may very well have encouraged bystanders to join the protests.

Yet, as the introduction to this volume suggests, attention to political institutions, and particularly those that often accompany democratic politics (e.g., party systems, freedom of the press, etc.) may provide important explanatory leverage in our understandings of when and where social movements emerge and why they take the forms they do. While scholars do not agree on which political institutions might be most conducive to political protest and why, further research on how different systems of representation might “open” or “close” opportunities for dissent could offer a useful parsing of the political opportunity concept.

Ultimately, the concept risks becoming a catchall framework that can play a role in the development of almost any social movement and can only be determined post hoc. This is not to say that political possibilities do not matter—indeed, any study of contention must also pay careful attention to the “political horizons” (Gould 2009) of the moment. We cannot simply look at the structural conditions during a given moment in political history and designate that moment a “political opportunity.”

Furthermore, even with the most felicitous conditions of “political opportunity,” some movements begin only after a so-called catalyzing event. Contingency appears to have remained central to our explanations for movements as influential as the Yellow Revolution in the Philippines, where the assassination of Benigno Aquino arguably played a critical role, and the antinuclear movement, which is difficult to explain without reference to the incident at Three Mile Island. As Gamson and Meyer note, “used to explain so much, [political opportunity structure] may ultimately explain nothing at all” (1996, 275).

As the importance of perceptions surfaced as a central critique of a purely structural approach to political opportunities, scholars began to

think systematically about the ways in which movement leaders help to shape those perceptions. In the mid-1980s, Snow et al. (1986, 464) developed the concept of frame alignment, arguing that for a social movement to resonate with individuals and, as a result, create a base of participants and support, the frames through which individuals understand the world must somehow align with a movement's goals or activities. McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald offer a succinct definition—"the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action" (1996, 6). Movements may emerge or grow because leaders frame or re-frame messages in ways that can attract a new or broader constituency. Or, potential participants may shift their own beliefs or expectations as a result of a movement's repackaging, bringing an audience into closer alignment with a movement's objectives.

Attention to frames can help us to understand movements as varied as the student mobilizations in China in 1989 and the white separatist movement in the 1990s in the United States. Craig Calhoun (1994) shows us how Chinese students changed the frames deployed throughout their movement from articulations that appealed specifically to students' conceptions of the role of intellectuals in Chinese society to broader appeals to patriotism and self-sacrifice. As the movement expanded, its leaders both responded to and helped to encourage increased participation by deploying frames that would resonate outside of the student community. In his study of white separatists in the United States, Berbrier (1998) shows how frame-transformation and frame-alignment processes worked not to appeal to new constituents, as they did in China, but rather to adapt to changing cultural practices. Movement leaders changed movement rhetoric from a language of hate to one of cultural pluralism, calling on love, pride, and heritage preservation to motivate their members.

While these two examples suggest a tight control over frames by movement leaders, other studies reveal that framing processes are highly contested and rarely controlled (e.g., see Babb 1996). Furthermore, while many studies take the meaning-making processes at the core of concepts like frame resonance as both given and coherent, theoretically there is room in frame analysis for movement participants to alter the meaning-making processes in which they are engaged. Through attention to

frames, we can see how movements themselves produce and reproduce “culture.”

An initial difficulty with much scholarly discussion of the framing and reframing process is that it often implies the exteriority of language, symbols, and historical memory. Frames often appear to come from outside of the social world of movement participants. This exteriority suggests an elite-mass dichotomy in which elites manipulate masses through the framing process. The approach often forgets that the language, symbols, and memory of both leaders and participants are embedded in the same context—movement-framing processes cannot exist outside of the social world in which the movement takes place (Mueller 1992, 5). As a result, frames themselves are a product of their context. The work that a frame does (or fails to do) to help motivate political protest can only be understood when we analyze the frame’s meanings in the contexts in which it is deployed.

Part of the challenge with much of the framing literature is that all of the relevant dynamics of meaning can be black-boxed by terms like “resonate.”⁷ The term is often deployed—particularly in the context of the literature on collective action—to refer to sympathetic or positive emotional responses to something. If a frame “resonates” we understand it to have evoked emotions, images, or memories. Yet even the metaphor of the frame suggests problems with the concept of frame resonance. A frame is something outside of something else—it is a border designed to enhance the appearance of a picture inside, or a basic structure designed to bear a load. The ways in which scholars deploy the frame metaphor places meanings somehow on the outside, while simultaneously insisting on a frame’s embeddedness. It is difficult to reconcile the two, and this may be at the root of many of the challenges inherent in using the concept of a frame to better understand processes of political contention.

The “Cultural Turn” and “New Social Movements”

The recent “cultural turn” in social movement theory encourages scholars to move beyond frames when incorporating culture into their analyses (e.g., see Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001; Gould 2004; Johnston, Laraña, and Gusfield 1994). Responding largely to the rise in identity- and

rights-based movements in the mid-1960s, much of this literature challenges the ways in which culture and emotions have been incorporated into—or ignored by—the political process model. Goodwin and Jasper (2004a) highlight many of the same drawbacks to approaches emphasizing political opportunities and mobilizing structures outlined above. They take the critique one step further, however, by arguing that political process theorists often incorporate culture in problematic ways. Cultural dynamics, they argue, are not all “captured by framing” (Goodwin and Jasper 2004a, 28). Furthermore, adherents to the political process model, they argue, often treat culture as a bounded “thing” instead of practices that are always changing and can have multiple significations. Goodwin and Jasper call on social movement scholars to “recognize that cultural and strategic processes define and create the factors usually presented as ‘structural,’ ” and to treat culture as “ubiquitous and constitutive dimension of *all* social relations, structures, networks and practices” (2004a, 23).

Emotions have received particular attention among adherents of the cultural turn, inspiring an edited volume on the subject (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001) and multiple chapters in other volumes (e.g., Gould 2004; Aminzade and McAdam 2001). Many contend that the emotional dimensions of social movements should not be simply subsumed into frame analysis. Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta go so far as to argue that “much of the causal force attributed to [mobilizing structures, frames, collective identity, and political opportunities] comes from the emotions involved in them” (2001, 6). Gould reminds us that, “analytical attention to the power of emotions . . . can provide us with important insights, illuminating, for example, participants’ subjectivities and motivations, and helping us to build compelling accounts of a movement’s trajectory, strategic choices, internal culture, conflicts, and other movement processes and characteristics” (2004, 157).

While political process theorists might be inclined to analyze emotions as part of an intentionally deployed mobilization strategy via resonant frames, an approach that sees emotions as *only* strategic overlooks a myriad of other roles that emotions can play in social movement dynamics. Gould (2004) encourages scholars to “bring emotions back in,” and argues in particular that by paying attention to the experience of feelings we can both shed light on questions central to mainstream social

movement research agendas and bring new subjects of inquiry to the fore. For example, Wood (2001; 2003) helps to explain participation in rebellion in El Salvador through attention to “process benefits.” Protest itself becomes an end goal as participants derive pleasure and pride from the experience. Jasper (1997) focuses our attention on the power of “moral outrage,” arguing that “moral shocks” can help to motivate movement participation. In her study of gay and lesbian activism around the AIDS crisis, Gould (2009) shows how emotional utterances (for example, expressions of grief or rage) can actually help to produce the very emotions articulated. The claim “we are angry” not only calls a particular “we” into being, but can also help to produce anger itself.

Insofar as the “cultural turn” emphasizes an approach to culture that treats culture as semiotic practices, its theoretical foundations open the door for renewed attention to grievances—to the moral and material claims that people make. But scholars tied to this “turn” also shy away from the explicit theorization of movement claims. In 1994, Johnston, Laraña, and Gusfield described grievances as a “forgotten theoretical issue,” and argued that “new social movement” research had revived attention to grievances (1994, 20). Yet while some of this literature draws attention to connections between shared feelings of injustice and strong attachments to collective identity, it does not offer a systematic theorization of different kinds of grievances and how they might work differently to prompt resistance.

Jasper’s (1997) work on “moral shocks” appears to be one of the few analyses that attempts to systematize how we think about grievances and the ways they work. But Jasper does not thoroughly explore why a threat to one issue or good might be understood as a “moral” shock in some times and places and not in others, or why different grievances might come together as common claims in some moments and fail to do so in others.⁸ In their critique of Jasper, Polletta and Amenta correctly observe that “virtually any event or new piece of information can be called in retrospect a moral shock,” and they enjoin scholars to “ask what it is about certain events that create such anger, outrage, and indignation in those exposed to them that they are driven to protest” (2001, 307). They go on to ask, “Are some *kinds of issues* more likely to generate moral shocks than others?” (Polletta and Amenta 2001, 307; emphasis in original). In the next

section of this chapter, I articulate a first step towards taking up Polletta and Amenta's call.

Proposing a Meaning-Laden Approach to Grievances

I propose that attention to grievances—understood to be constituted by not only material, but also ideational claims—can deepen our analysis of the dynamics of contention (see also Simmons 2014; 2016c; 2016b; 2016a). I begin with the idea that social movement theory needs to bring the role of the grievance back in. While efforts that focus on strain, breakdown, or relative deprivation (discussed at the beginning of this chapter) may have been rightly sidelined, they should not be thrown out entirely. The content of a movement's claims can influence movement emergence, trajectory, and composition, and should therefore play a central role in our analyses. Indeed, as Arce and Rice show in the introductory chapter to this volume, different kinds of grievances may have different effects on protest and in particular its impact. The key is to create useful categories of analysis—for Arce and Rice, disaggregating “economic threat” into “globalization” and “inequality” added important leverage to their analysis. While discontent may be constant (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1988) different types of discontent may have different effects on social movement emergence, growth, and decline.

I argue that a potentially fruitful approach to categorizing grievances is through a focus on what certain events or sets of claims *mean*. For example, inequality will take on different meanings across different times and places (and even within those times and places), and it works to produce protest (or not) differently as a result. I would take Arce and Rice's analysis in chapter 1 a step further to say that the economic conditions that have accompanied globalization should not be lumped together without a corresponding analysis of what those conditions mean to the people who experience them. Social movement theory would do well to focus its lens on the meaning work done by grievances—understood as meaning-laden claims—and how that work can help to explain the timing and composition of political protest.

Resources, political opportunities, and frames are critical to our understandings of social movements. But I propose that adherents to the

political process model should pay careful attention to *how* resources, opportunities, or frames become available and *why* they are available to some movements and not to others. Here, attention to the grievance—understood as constituted by material and symbolic claims and conceptions—can enhance our analysis, serving as a moving part that contributes additional explanatory power to existing approaches (Simmons 2014; 2016c). By incorporating the meanings of grievances, we can deepen our understandings of these three processes as well as the broader dynamics of social movement emergence and development.

Grievances are most usually treated as objectively identifiable claims. Grievances are things we can easily observe, compare, and quantify, even without local knowledge. Grievances at the core of social movement activity have included everything from property taxes, to racial discrimination, to abortion, to climate change. They can make claims relevant at the international, national, or highly local levels. A meaning-laden approach to grievances recognizes that these claims are both materially and ideationally constituted—that to understand the grievance at, for example, the center of the gay marriage movement, we have to understand what marriage means in different times and places and to different people, and how those meanings work to shape both support for, and opposition to, the movement. Furthermore, a meaning-laden approach suggests that the ideas with which some claims are imbued might be more conducive to motivating political resistance than others.

The approach is inherently grounded in context—scholars begin by understanding the meanings that grievances take on in particular times and places. But it is also potentially generalizable; as scholars uncover the ways in which apparently different grievances may represent similar ideas across time and place, those grievances can be categorized similarly, and their potential relationship to social mobilization explored. The approach does not focus on the deliberate work that social movement activists do to articulate grievances and construct resonate frames or, more generally, how people “do things” with culture (Williams 2007). Nor does it treat systems of symbols as static, coherent, or fixed, in the way that some scholarship suggests.⁹ I seek, in other words, to take neither an agentive nor a structural approach to culture.

Instead, I draw on an anthropological conceptualization of culture as “semiotic practices” to look behind the agency-oriented approaches that dominate the cultural social movement literature. This approach pays particular attention to “what language and symbols *do*—how they are inscribed into concrete actions and how they operate to produce observable political effects” (Wedeen 2002, 714; emphasis in original), as opposed to what actors do with them. These meanings are constantly contested, both by chronologically linear processes of change and by the multiple significations that may exist within social groups. When we look at how symbols operate in the world, understanding them as dynamic and conflicted, we can begin to ask questions about why and how meanings might work to help generate moments of collective political protest.

I propose that a close parsing of the work that symbols do can give us analytical leverage over questions of movement emergence and composition. By focusing our analytic lens on the ways in which different grievances are imbued with similar or different meanings in different contexts, we can come to think of grievances as more than just the relative gain or loss of a material “thing” or a set of political privileges. Williams encourages us to think about “*socially and culturally available* array of symbols and meanings from which movements can draw” (2007, 96; emphasis in original). These symbols and meanings inform our understandings of what a grievance “is.” By understanding grievances as embedded in cultural context, we can productively engage with the ways in which the claims themselves shape social movement outcomes, not simply how movement entrepreneurs articulate those claims.

The framing literature recognizes that grievances take on meanings and that these meanings matter for how people are mobilized. Certain issues in certain communities will be more easily translated or constructed in such a way as to have enough motivational power to become a rallying point for collective action. Whether there is a systematic, cross-contextual relationship between the meaning of the grievances and the power of a particular frame goes relatively ignored, even in an approach as attentive to grievances as the framing one is. Which frames resonate and when may indeed be highly contingent: similar grievances in a physical sense could resonate with different ethnic or national identities, different myths or historical experiences, and take on different meanings as a result. Which

frame is developed and how becomes a secondary concern. Instead, the question is whether there is something systematic about the way the *problems themselves* are understood that is likely to generate collective action frames irrespective of the context.

It is theoretically possible that certain *categories* of grievances, where the meaning of the grievance and not its physical attributes produces the category, are likely to have more frame resonance than others. The framing literature helps us understand how frames work but not whether there is something systematic about the meanings that make those frames possible and potent. The potential for systematic similarities between grievances with “potent” frame resonance is left unexplored.

The basic argument proposed here is that while grievances maintain material power, their ideational aspects, as well as the reciprocal relationship between the two, play a critical role in developing understandings of what the grievance “is.” The meanings with which grievances are imbued should be considered a product of what we might understand to be their materiality. At the same time, those meanings themselves help to determine and define how we understand that very material value. As Wedeen has argued, “material interests might be fruitfully viewed not as objective criteria but as being discursively produced: in other words, what counts as material interest is mediated through our language about what ‘interest’ means and what the material is” (2008, 183). Furthermore, the relationship is not static. Instead, the “ideational” and the “material” continually work in ways that are “reciprocally determining, that is, mutually implicated in the changes that each undergoes through time” (Wedeen 2008, 49). Voting is not simply the act of putting a marked piece of paper in a ballot box to select a political leader, though we might understand the action to be part of the material component of voting. Instead, it has a host of different meanings for different actors in different contexts. As a result, restricting or expanding voting privileges may mean different things in different times and places to different people. In addition to the material aspect of the reform—the restriction or expansion of voting—it might symbolize, for example, freedom, democracy, dictatorship, or revolution.

But even as this chapter proposes a move towards cultural context, it is also explicitly focused on the potential for developing analytical categories of grievances with generalizable purchase. Apparently different claims in

decidedly different contexts may take on similar meanings and, as a result, generate protest through similar mechanisms. We would then want to think about the processes through which those meanings are produced and reproduced, trying to identify why and how apparently different material goods take on similar meanings. We could then create a broader analytical category for the type of grievance (for example, market-driven subsistence resource threats) and do systematic research to understand the ways in which similar moments in which the grievance (defined materially and ideationally) is present might produce similar patterns of resistance in different contexts. Through this analysis we could generate causal accounts of social mobilization where the meanings that the grievances take on are part of the causal story.

A comparison of protests against water privatization in Cochabamba, Bolivia, and appeals for affordable tortillas in Mexico City, Mexico, provides a useful illustration (see Simmons 2016c for a full elaboration). In both places, the grievances at stake (water in Cochabamba and corn in Mexico) had come to mean community to many of the people participating in the movements. The marketization of water or corn not only put patterns of material consumption at risk, but also threatened understandings of self, neighborhood, region, or nation. To threaten access to water in Cochabamba was to threaten ancestral *usos y costumbres* (roughly translated as “traditions and customs”); to tap into a legacy of cultivation and regional scarcity; to undermine irrigation and water-collection practices, as well as the community organizations that had developed to maintain these practices; and to challenge a pervasive belief that water belonged to the people. In Mexico, tortillas, and corn more generally, are not only a cornerstone of both urban and rural diets, but also a foundation of mythology, a centerpiece of daily ritual and social interaction, and a part of how many conceive of themselves as Mexican. In each of these contexts, to threaten water or corn was to threaten not only a material relationship with a material good, but perceptions of community as well. When we understand both grievances as meaning-laden, we can better understand the movements that emerged to defend them.

Conclusion

The central objective of this chapter has been to provide an overview of the dominant approaches to the study of social movements. The chapter began with a look at early theorizing on collective action that emphasized externally induced sociostructural strains and grievances as the principal causes of social discontent and mobilization. This approach gave way to alternative explanations that emphasized internal factors, such as networks and resources, as well as broader political and contextual factors that facilitate or inhibit movement emergence. The chapter also examined the recent “cultural turn” in social movement theorizing and its emphasis on meaning and identity as important variables in generating and sustaining collective action. Drawing on this body of literature, the chapter called for renewed analytical attention to the content of social movement claims through a meaning-laden approach to grievances.

The key to future research in this vein is to pay attention to the meanings these grievances take on in the particular times and places in which they emerge. One need only think of the variety of claims that social movements voice to think of other potential objects of inquiry. For example, it seems obvious that electoral irregularities will be understood differently in different contexts. Perhaps an understanding of what elections have come to mean can help us explain why, in some cases, electoral fraud leads to widespread unrest while in others we see little or no social response. Yet social scientists can, and often do, code electoral fraud similarly, and come to general conclusions as a result.¹⁰ Attention to other types of claims may yield similar results. For example, if we understand repression as a meaning-laden claim—the same kind of physical punishment may take on different meanings in different times and places—we may be able to shed light on the variation in the ways in which repression can work both to put out the flames of resistance in some moments and fan those very flames in others. All repression should not be coded similarly as it is likely to work differently depending, at least in part, on the meanings it takes on. By looking at the meanings with which various acts of repression are imbued, we might think systematically about when we expect them to work a certain way, and when we expect the opposite effect.

The implications of the theory developed here is that when we code a movement's claims based on strictly material considerations, we lose the variation in the grievance produced by the meanings it takes on. An understanding of what elections *mean*, for example, will help scholars better explain and predict when their violation is likely to create opposition. When we understand grievances as meaning-laden, we may shed light on patterns in how opportunities emerge, resources are built, and frames become available. Grievances can be a "moving part" of analysis, which can deepen existing understandings of the dynamics of contention.

NOTES

- 1 See McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996) and Tarrow (1998) for an overview of the social movement literature. See McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) for the most recent iteration of dominant frameworks in the field.
- 2 For further elaboration see Simmons (2016c; 2016b; 2014).
- 3 Snow et al. (1998) categorize "breakdowns" as a subset of the "strain" theory.
- 4 An additional line of critique focused assumptions of irrationality and disconnection embedded in strain theories (McAdam 1999). The movements of the 1960s suggested that participants could be both rational actors and highly embedded in dense social networks.
- 5 Edwards and McCarthy draw heavily on Cress and Snow (1996).
- 6 See Skocpol (1979) and Goodwin (2001) for exceptions.
- 7 Thanks to Elisabeth Clemens for helping to bring this to my attention.
- 8 Thanks are due to Sidney Tarrow for helping to clarify the second half of this observation.
- 9 Here I am drawing on a widely accepted critique of Clifford Geertz's work on Indonesia (Geertz 1973, 1980; Wedeen 2002). See also Goodwin and Jasper (2004a).
- 10 Joshua Tucker (2007) both supports my claim that the systematic study of electoral fraud should yield generalizable results and treats all electoral fraud as if it might have the same results. In fact, his argument, grounded in a rational-choice framework, suggests that electoral fraud should take on the same meaning across time and place, as long as citizens have "serious grievances against their government" (Tucker 2007, 537). Almeida (2003) also suggests that he understands fraudulent elections to function similarly across place and time when he states that fraudulent elections can serve as a particularly powerful motivator for threat-induced collective action.

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