
Review Essay

Unifying Social Movement Theories

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Dynamics of Contention. By McAdam, Doug, Tarrow, Sidney, and Tilly, Charles. New York and Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2001. 387 pages, ISBN: 0521011876.

Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics. By Aminzade, Ronald R., Goldstone, Jack A., McAdam, Doug, Perry, Elizabeth J., Sewell, William H., Jr., Tarrow, Sidney, and Tilly, Charles. New York and Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2001. 280 pages, ISBN: 0521001552.

The publication of *Dynamics of Contention* (hereafter *DoC*) and its companion volume, *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics* (hereafter *S&V*) is a significant event. The books are “reports” on a unique project initially aimed at the “exploration and synthesis of the distinct fields of social movements. . .” (*DoC*, p. xiii). Ultimately the books’ aim grew into developing a unified, conceptually ad hoc theory applied to the spectrum of social movements across histories and cultures.

The project was initiated in 1995; it was publically announced the next year in the lead essay of the first edition of *Mobilization*, a journal devoted to studies of social movements. The 1996 essay and *DoC* are authored by Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly.

DoC and *S&V* are complex books. Their complexity stems from two sources. First, although the authors are major contributors to social movement theory, they now view their earlier work as deficient and are determined to move forward theoretically. A new theory requires a new conceptual language which they employ, and some description of their language is necessary to assess the significance of the work in a manner appropriate to the authors’ intentions. The second source of complexity stems from the authors’ attempt to integrate “structure and agency” while accommodating theory to the fragmented character of everyday social life. Use of an appropriate epistemology is a difficult problem facing contemporary sociological theory in general. Many sociologists have stumbled upon the obstacles

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of conjoining structure, agency and societal fragmentation in social theory, and many have failed in their theorizing. The authors of the two books stumble and fail. It is important to see how they fail and to establish the bases for it.

The conceptual complexity begins with the authors' declared intention to study "contentions" or "contentious politics," terms coined to identify the array of movements included in their proposed unification. Paraphrasing the authors' definition, one form of the terms refers to situations in which previously apolitical or unorganized groups limited or excluded from participation in established political processes employ innovative actions against those in authority (a government or governmental agency) to make and achieve claims, occasionally resulting in a reconfiguration of political interests and resources among the contesting parties.¹ They refer to this form of claim making as "transgressive contention."

In contrast to transgressive contention, "contained contention" refers to contentious political claims made by recognized political actors engaged in struggles or conflicts conducted within established political channels (*DoC*, p. 315). The authors stress that the "book's cases fall overwhelmingly on the transgressive side. . ." (p. 8). Despite the distinction between transgressive and contained contentious politics both types may be analyzed using the unification. Also, the two forms of contention are distinguishable from established, conventional forms of politics (p. 341).

The theoretical concepts for the new unification are presented in *DoC*. *S&V* takes up another task. The word "silence" in the title refers to neglected concepts in studies of contention and not to neglected voices of peoples such as subaltern societal members. Each *S&V* chapter reviews a concept claimed to be punitively neglected or omitted from studies of contentious politics.

DoC is presented in three parts. The first part describes concepts available for the study of contentions, criticizing their earlier so-called "classical social movement agenda" for its static conceptual categories and its cultural bias as a model fit to Western democracies.² Interactive processes in social movements are introduced in Part I. Part II further develops an interactive conception of contentious politics. Part III claims to move the analysis to a dynamic conception of contention, illustrating it from revolutionary, nationalist and democratizing movements. The organizing principle for *DoC*, and from which it takes its title, is that of moving from a static to interactive to dynamic conceptions of social movements to achieve the unification.

The concepts for the unification are inductively acquired from repeated observation in a variety of contentious episodes. Using new terminology, the authors

¹The authors' definition may be found in *DoC*, p. 5 and in *S&V*, p. 7.

²These criticisms are directed at McAdam's structural model, now referred to as the "classical social movement agenda" that the authors portray, including in it Tilly's conception of repertoires, Tarrow's conception of threat, and Snow et al.'s conception of framing (*DoC*, figure 1.2, p. 17). The essay that announced the unification project (1996) leans heavily upon McAdam's 1982 structural model to describe the project's intentions.

label the concepts “causal mechanics” and “casual processes.” The authors insist they are not creating a general theory of conceptual laws operating invariantly in all forms of contention. Instead, the ways in which mechanisms and processes combine, sequence and are influenced by local circumstances shape social movement consequences. Movement outcomes derived from the same mechanisms vary from one episode to another. Mechanisms are

... a delimited class of events that alter relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations. (*DoC*, p. 24)

Processes are

... regular sequences of such mechanisms that produce similar (generally more complex and contingent) transformations of those elements. (*DoC*, p. 24)

In the operations of mechanisms and processes contentious “episodes” are created; they are defined “as a stream of contention. . .” The authors note, “In this study, a search for explanatory mechanisms and processes takes the place occupied by a checklist of variables—i.e., opportunity, threat, mobilizing structures, repertoires, framing—we saw in the classic social movement agenda” (*DoC*, p. 32). They conclude:

We employ mechanisms and processes as our workhorses of explanations, episodes as our workhorses of description. We. . . bet on how the social world works. . . big structures and sequences never repeat themselves, but result from differing combinations and sequences of mechanisms. . . (p. 30)

Mechanisms and processes result in contentions being “complex” and “contingent” rather than being specifiable *a priori*. Conceptions of “complex” and “contingent” require a changed epistemology from that of the “classical social movement agenda.” The authors point to four epistemologies employed in the study of social movements. They draw heavily upon their own structural approach, attempting to join it to the cultural and to the rational (with the phenomenological heard about only critically) in their effort to fashion a new epistemology for the unification.

The authors suggest for their new approach an epistemology of human agency that emphasizes a conception of conscious, self-reflective, directing and determining activists. Within the changed epistemology, threats and opportunities “cannot be automatically read from the kinds of objective changes on which analysts have typically relied” (*DoC*, p. 46). The authors note also, “Framing is not simply an expression of preexisting group claims but an active, creative, constitutive process” (p. 16). They conclude, “The most important implication of our agenda is to stress the development of contention through social interaction and to place social construction at the center of our analysis” (p. 51).

The authors put forth a new agenda for the study of social movements that goes something like this: Opportunities and threats are activists’ attributions. Mobilizing structures are activists’ appropriations of organizations and resources transformed

from their previous missions to weapons used for contention. Framing refers to activists' constructions providing an outlook on the movement, its adversaries, coworkers, etc. Repertoires are elevated from standardized normative scenarios into innovative collective actions. Contentious episodes are dynamic, evolving social contexts occurring among activists, co-activists, leaders, observers, adversaries, government agencies and media.

Part I ends by listing fifteen episodes that will be used to illustrate the unification. The authors intend to demonstrate the robustness of mechanisms and how they combine and sequence to particularize outcomes. Each illustration is of paired cases that are historically and culturally varied. The first pair in Part II, chapter 4 is the Mau Mau revolt in 1950 Kenya compared to the Yellow Revolution against the Marcos regime in the 1980s Philippines. Three mechanisms are used for the analysis. The first two are the attribution of threat and opportunity and social appropriation. The third mechanism "brokerage" links "two or more previously unconnected social sites. . ." to create multigroup "stable sites" or relationally to mobilize new groups (pp. 92, 26). Following brief descriptions of the Mau Mau revolt and the Yellow Revolution, the authors conclude

. . . that the same basic mobilization mechanisms...appeared in the two distinctly different episodes of contention suggests that they will turn out to be robust components of any process of mobilization...the very different trajectories of the two episodes owed much to the different manifestations of the processes. . . (p. 123).

The outcome for the Mau Mau revolt was extreme violence, few brokered organizational alliances among contentious groups, and an episode portrayed as a civil war. In contrast, the Yellow Revolution was relatively nonviolent, creating both nationally and locally networked organizations opposed to the Marcos regime, and is labeled a democratizing movement. The authors indicate that other mechanisms were involved in these episodes such as certifying (i.e., legitimating) and decertifying (i.e., delegitimizing) leaders in authority and regimes. Processes associated with the certifying/decertifying mechanism also influenced the distinctive character of the two episodes.

The comparative model presented in chapter 4 is recapitulated in chapter 5, comparing a Hindu-Muslim conflict in South Asia with the South African struggle against apartheid. Chapter 6 compares the U.S. Civil War with Spain's democratization. Each subsequently paired illustration uses concepts already employed, adding to them other ad hoc acquired mechanisms and processes.

Part III illustrates "the dynamics of contention" applied to macro-structural contentions. Chapter seven focuses on revolutions; eight is devoted to the unification of Italy and the disintegration of the Soviet Union; and nine analyzes the democratization of Switzerland and Mexico. My remarks will be confined to chapter seven, the "Revolutionary Trajectories" exhibited in the 1979 Nicaragua revolution and the 1989 Tiananmen Square student democracy movement.

The authors criticize previous formulations until the “fourth generation” of revolutionary scholarship that “. . . grants more attention to the role of human agency and cultural construction in the emergence of revolution” (p. 194). While the fourth generation made theoretical gains, the authors suggest their work still falls short, failing “. . . to examine the transformative mechanisms that produce revolutionary outcomes out of revolutionary situations” (ibid.).

The mechanisms added in chapter seven are “suddenly imposed grievances” and “regime elite defections.” The former mechanism is depicted as natural and/or social disasters that increase grievances against the regime. The latter refers to some regime elites aligning with the activists.

In the Nicaraguan and Chinese episodes these two mechanisms are added to opportunities, cross-class alliances and decertification of regime and its leaders. In the Nicaraguan case the first two mechanisms occurred in addition to increased opportunities, cross-class alliances and the widespread decertification of the Somoza regime by Latin American nations and the United States, resulting in a successful Nicaraguan revolutionary outcome.

The Tiananmen activists experienced a suddenly imposed grievance, increased opportunities and cross-class alliances but neither the defection of regime elites nor an effective international outcry against the PRC’s brutal treatment of the students. The authors write that it “would be hard to imagine a revolutionary situation coming to any more abrupt or public a failure than in the 1989 Chinese student movement” (p. 207). Little new methodologically or epistemologically is added to the unification in chapters 8 and 9. Thus, at the end of chapter seven the unification is established.

Brief remarks about *S&V* round out the description of the project’s “reports.” Writing in an inclusive vein Tarrow notes, “Familiar voice and muted silences need to be combined to provide a theoretically driven and empirically satisfying account” (*S&V*, p. 3). Translated from the project’s perspective this means there are other possible mechanisms and processes presented as chapters in *S&V*, e.g., emotions, space, time, leadership, state responses, demography and life-course. The concepts are illustrated and reviewed for their significance but no effort is made to integrate them as mechanisms to the unification, although their conceptual language is co-opted for potential future inclusion.

The attempt to unify analyses of contentions across a spectrum of movements occurring within varying histories and cultures is praiseworthy on its face. Transforming social movement analyses from static to interactive and dynamic is a virtue, for it permits studies of structures’ and activists’ evolution over the course of contentious episodes, a process neglected in the “classical social movement agenda.” An epistemology that integrates activists’ experiences and intentions regarding mobilization, participation and the structuring of movements enhances studies’ validity as it humanizes the depictions of contentious episodes (see Tilly 2002).

Yet the proposed unification falls short of achieving these beneficial changes. The authors appear ambivalent about the necessary epistemic changes to accomplish the unification's laudatory intentions. And their resistance undermines the unification's usefulness.

STRUCTURE AND CULTURE

The authors' commitment to the structural approach undercuts their epistemological revision. They are reluctant to reformulate structure radically in order to break this conceptual impasse.

In a discussion of activists' consciousness and decision-making, the authors limit agency by stressing that activists' mental processes occur within "...webs of interaction among social sites" and these are not reducible to "individual mental events," thus "this book...assigns great causal efficacy to relational processes" (*DoC*, p. 23). By insisting that activists' consciousness and decision-making occur within determining networks the authors reassert structure's explanatory priority, thereby diminishing activists' agency. Unfortunately, their structural commitments do not end here.

The authors describe mechanisms within three broad categories. These are: environmental, relational and cognitive. Environmental mechanisms are "externally generated influences on conditions affecting social life." Relational mechanisms "alter connections among people, groups and interpersonal networks." Cognitive mechanisms "operate through alternations of individual and collective perception; words like recognize, understand, reinterpret, and classify characterize such mechanisms" (*DoC*, pp. 25–26).

Environmental and relational mechanisms are patently structural. Cognitive mechanisms appear personal, yet their empirical illustrations indicate they are structurally determined.

For example, commitment is a widely recurrent individual mechanism in which persons who individually would prefer not to take the risks of collective action find themselves unable to withdraw without hurting others whose solidarity they value—sometimes at the cost of suffering serious loss. (*DoC*, p. 26)

Depicting cognition as determined by its linkage to structural networks is also found in "identity shift," a cognitive mechanism employed throughout *DoC*. By identity shift is meant changes in groups' collective identities by altering the shared definitions between and across political actors' boundaries (p. 162). Identity shift is used to explain the onset of the American Civil War. The authors claim that identity shifts in the South, North and Western territories (about to enter the Union as free or slave states) brought about war. Yet, the authors make identity shift a concept shaped by structures and networks rather than an independent factor in initiating the war. They write:

If demographic and economic changes provided a structural foundation for political change, it promoted collective action through the formation of new identities. (p.167; also see p. 26)

A new identity in the North and West resulted from coalitions “. . . among abolitionists, eastern merchants, western farmers (‘free soil’ ideologists) and Protestants, their social vision and political identity broadened to that of free men employing free labor on free soil, opposing ‘slavery’s illegitimate coercions [sic] and’ . . . [a]ntislavery gave a moral gloss to this new identity.” The South underwent an identity shift too but it was a “mirror image process of identity” of that which occurred in the North and West (p. 168).

DoC’s conception of a unified identity shift in the pre-Civil War North and West, to be sure, is an empirical gloss, but even more important it is an egregious epistemic error. It eliminates human agency by insisting that structural conditions shaped Northerners and Westerners in developing their universally shared identity. The imputed causation in this historical illustration moves from structure to culture or specifically from “demography and economy” to new identity.

The “classical social movement agenda” made similar directional imputations. In McAdam’s 1982 version of the classical model, the cultural component was “cognitive liberation” instead of identity shift. Cognitive liberation encouraged oppressed people to rebel but only when structural circumstances provided *favorable* opportunities and therefore unthreatening structural conditions to do so.

Having theoretically attributed cultural agency (consciousness, self-reflection, etc.) to activists in theory, as the authors did in chapter one, they cannot shut down their volition by tying them to structural networks or by capriciously reclaiming the structural determination of their thinking and consciousness. Autonomous capacities once imbued in theory remain with the actors so conceived. Once having theorized activists’ relationship to “threats and opportunities” or to “appropriation of organization and resources” as designed from activists’ perspectives, then all structures that activists face must be formulated as malleable to their subjective consciousness.

In order to create epistemological consistency in the unification the authors cannot simply insist upon structural determinism. Instead, what is required is admission into theory the autonomies of culture and structure each meeting on negotiated grounds of causation. This formulation would rescue the unification because it would maintain a conception of the autonomy of culture and structure affecting activists. This theoretic solution limits analysts’ authority in constructing activists’ consciousness but it restores to activists sovereignty over their versions of contentious episodes.³

³William Sewell Jr. (1992), a contributor to *S&V*, provided an initial theoretical solution to the structural vs. cultural determination tension but it was not incorporated into the unification.

MECHANISMS AND PROCESSES

Despite the centrality of mechanisms and processes to the unification, no precise definitions of these concepts are provided. The authors ask, "How will we recognize a ...mechanism when we see one?" They reply,

... when a mechanism is at work we see interactions among the elements in question altering the established connections among them." They note too, "Processes worth singling out here involve recurrent combinations and sequences of mechanisms that operate identically or with great similarity across a variety of situations. (*DoC*, pp. 26–27)

When mechanisms such as brokerage, identity shift or decertification are discussed the authors illustrate these with empirical features that, in common sense, conform to the titles of the mechanism. But those unfamiliar with or uninitiated to the work of the project would be hard-pressed to guide their investigations of social movements using *DoC*'s formulations of mechanisms and processes. It would be difficult to decide which activities in a fragmented social world would fit the very large array of mechanisms and processes presented in *DoC*. The descriptions and illustrations of mechanisms and processes are too ambiguous to operationalize precisely for empirical research.

The word ambiguous brings to mind a related problem. Why are some environmental, relational and cognitive experiences, practices and circumstances accorded the statuses of mechanisms and processes while other recurrent environmental, relational and cognitive processes are not so designated? There is one frequently remarked upon environmental circumstance of particular interest here because its absence from the panoply of mechanisms is obvious. An environmental condition repeatedly referred to as occurring at the outset of contentious episodes but not attributed the status of a mechanism is "ambiguous and/or uncertain environmental circumstances" (*DoC*, see pp. 9, 26, 97, 223, 225, 241, 342). One example from the many expressions of this will suffice: "Episodes of contention typically grow out of and depend on a perception of significant environmental uncertainty on the part of state and non-state elites and challenger alike" (p. 97).

Why then is this repeated environmental circumstance, and personal experience, not elevated to a mechanism alongside opportunity and threat? Why aren't the environmental alternatives facing potential activists opportunity, threat and uncertainty? The answer resides again in the authors' commitment to structuralism but this time laced with rationalism. Opportunities and threats are relatively visible structures, thus the costs for activism in these conditions may be estimated.

It appears that the inclusion of concepts is based on more than their recurrent robustness. The inclusion of mechanisms and processes involves assumptions about the character of social life and the kind of theory that should be fashioned to it. Uncertainty and ambiguity do not attain the status of mechanisms because the authors' structural and rational inclinations permit actions based on imputed measurable gains and costs (i.e., rational assessment of opportunities and threats) while

ambiguous or uncertain environmental circumstances do not fit to rational grounds for decision-making. The inclusion of environmental ambiguity-uncertainty would introduce into the unification incalculable circumstances, thereby opening to activists the potential for indecisiveness, confusion, imagination, inventiveness and perhaps even emotional or irrational action. Further, these uncertain or ambiguous environmental conditions may induce in activists experiences of tension and strain, conditions and experiences assiduously eschewed in *DoC*.⁴

If mechanisms and processes are to be the workhorses of explanations they require precise rules in theory for their inclusion or exclusion from the unification. It is not enough to induce mechanisms and processes from their appearance of recurrent robustness in a variety of episodes. Explicit conceptual rules are needed to observe the empirical social world. Without conceptual and procedural rules it is impossible to abstract from the social world precise evidence to test theory.

A DISCONCERTING PROBLEM

S&V does not justify the concepts as chapters included in the volume. Also, the concepts are not theorized as part of the unification. It is questionable, too, whether all of the included concepts have been silent (e.g., religion) in studies of social movements. Indeed, it may be that the authors did not hear from several of the concepts because in the 1980s they were engaged in silencing concepts (e.g., emotions) that existed outside of their “classical social movement agenda.” Despite their good intentions, McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly are still engaged in silencing concepts. Although the authors liken their interactive/dynamic unification to that of conversation and communication analyses (*see DoC*, pp. 16, 22, 27), there is no chapter in *S&V* devoted to the sociology of language, increasingly employed in many forms (e.g., narrative, discourse, dialogue, rhetorical, communication, conversation, sociolinguistic), with considerable success, in the study of social movements.

The solution to this problem is simple. Initiate a dialogue among those committed to diverse conceptual approaches to the study of social movements. And create a dialogue that does not place at its center a vested structural model which assists but also circumscribes theoretical and conceptual advance in theorizing a new approach to the study of contentions and contentious episodes.

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⁴On environmental uncertainty, ambiguity and strain see Snow et al. (1998); Platt and Williams (2002).

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