

## People, Passions, and Power

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# Rethinking Social Movements

## *Structure, Meaning, and Emotion*

Edited by  
Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper

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Menace ([www.apocalypse.org/pub/tsmenace/](http://www.apocalypse.org/pub/tsmenace/)), and The International Conference on Transgender Law and Employment Policy, Inc. ([www.abmall.com/ictlep/](http://www.abmall.com/ictlep/)). See especially, Jessica Xavier, "TS Feminism and TG Politicization" ([www.tgender.net/ita/library/](http://www.tgender.net/ita/library/)); and Sarah DePalma, "1995 Editorial on HRCF and ENDA" ([www.tgender.net/ita/library/](http://www.tgender.net/ita/library/)). On bisexual activism, see Tucker (1995); and BiNet U.S.A. ([www.binetusa.org](http://www.binetusa.org)).

6. For good recommendations on how to integrate structuralist and culturalist perspectives in the study of formal movement organizations, see Minkoff (2001).

## The Poststructuralist Consensus in Social Movement Theory

CHARLES KURZMAN

I ask you to overlook the barbs and outrage of part I of this volume. I urge you to ignore both sides' claims of victimization: the "hegemonic" grip of the "winding, snarling vine" of structuralism (Goodwin and Jasper, hereafter "Jaswin," chapter 1), or the AMA-like monopolistic tendencies of the antistructuralists (Tilly, chapter 2). I propose that the debate boils down to this:

Jaswin decry the structuralist bias in social movement theory; leading figures deny that there is a structuralist bias in social movement theory. For example, Jaswin quote Tarrow (1994:17) sounding structuralist: "The main argument of this study is that people join in social movements in response to political opportunities." Tarrow's response (chapter 3) denies that this "snippet" represents the "main argument" of the book and offers a counter-quotation that downplays political opportunity structures. Jaswin identify Tilly as one of the perpetrators of structuralism; Tilly responds that he is not now, nor has he ever been, a structuralist—at least by Jaswin's definition—nor is any "active participant in the debate" (chapter 2). Jaswin quote Gamson and Meyer's (1996) critique of political opportunity structures, reproaching leading figures for "not treat[ing] it seriously." Meyer's response reiterates and elaborates the critique but quotes leading figures as agreeing with him (chapter 4).

Will nobody defend structuralism? Koopmans offers a backhanded defense, arguing that structures may play a role—sometimes, in cross-national comparisons, if movements choose to obey (chapter 5). Only Polletta (chapter 7) comes out to defend structuralism, at least a cultural structuralism.

In my view, then, the disagreements hide a near-consensus: structural-

ism is on the outs in social movement theory. But practices, I would argue, have not caught up with the poststructuralist norms.

### THE DECLINE OF STRUCTURALISM

When did structuralism cease to motivate social movement theory, and why wasn't I informed? A decade ago, when I was beginning my doctoral research, I thought I was clever and iconoclastic to criticize structuralism in social movement theory. I entitled my dissertation "Structure and Agency in the Iranian Revolution of 1979" to highlight my contribution to the literature, and I organized a large part of the theory chapter as a critique of what I took to be the reigning state-structuralist orthodoxy in the study of social movements and revolutions. I quoted examples of analytical statements that privileged state structure:

"The dramatic turnabout in the political environment originated in economic trends and political realignments that took place quite independent of any 'push' from insurgents." (Jenkins and Perrow, 1977:266)

"In the first place, an adequate understanding of social revolutions requires that the analyst take a nonvoluntarist, structural perspective on their causes and processes." (Skocpol, 1979:14)

"[C]ontinued pressure from the international system, conjoined with certain structural characteristics, precipitates revolution." (Goldstone, 1980b:449)

"The opportunities for a challenger to engage in successful collective action do vary greatly over time. And it is these variations that are held to be related to the ebb and flow of movement activity." (McAdam, 1982:40-41)

"Considerable evidence now exists suggesting the crucial importance of changes in the 'structure of political opportunities' (Eisinger 1973) for the ebb and flow of movement activity." (McAdam, 1988b:128)

"These findings suggest that it may be primarily the conditions of national politics and not factors internal to social movements which determine their 'careers.'" (Klandermans and Tarrow, 1988:17)

Who knew that I was merely a puppet of the zeitgeist? It turns out that my concerns about structuralism were commonplace, and that structuralists were abandoning the donkey even as I was trying to pin the tail on it. No statement like any of the above appears in part I of this volume, and I would be surprised if these stark statements have many supporters these days.

Today, statements about state structure are generally hedged and modified, and causal factors accumulate like Occam's stubble. John Foran (1993) has called this "conjunctural modeling": states matter, culture matters, social structure matters, accidents of history matter—everything matters! This is the same credo that emerges from the defendants in part I: "political process analysts . . . actually have the habit of intoning not a single slogan but a four-part litany: political opportunities . . . , mobilizing structures, framing processes, and contentious interaction" (Tilly, chapter 2); "most political process theorists . . . try to explain movements as the outcome of a combination of structural and cultural as well as long-term and contingent factors and of the interactive logics of the political struggle" (Tarrow, chapter 3).

These laundry-list formulations reduce opportunity, particularly the structure of political opportunity, to one of a number of causal factors that may or may not be operative in any particular case. Gone is the confident logic of the Millian method of difference that animated structuralist analyses: where political opportunities are absent, protest does not occur (or does not succeed); where political opportunities are present, protest occurs (and succeeds). In its place is a cautious logic of multivariate probabilism: political opportunity is one of a number of factors that may increase the likelihood of the emergence or success of some protest movements. Political opportunity has shrunk from a structure to a variable; as noted by Koopmans (chapter 5), the word "structure" is now often dropped from the phrase "political opportunity structure."

The abandonment of structuralism is starkly evident in the two editions of Sidney Tarrow's *Power in Movement* (1994 and 1998b). Perhaps others have also noticed how the conclusion changes? The first edition concludes that "the main incentives for movement creation and diffusion are found in the structure of political opportunities. Increasing access to power, realignments in the political system, conflicts among elites and the availability of allies give early challengers the incentives to assault the power structure and create opportunities for others" (Tarrow, 1994:189). In other words, conducive structural conditions allow protest to emerge (although, Tarrow adds, protesters may not have enough solidarity and collective identity to take advantage of the opportunity). The second edition concludes:

Enough has been said about changes in political opportunities and constraints in this study to make it necessary only to repeat that, while they do not on their own "explain" social movements, they play the strongest role in triggering general episodes of contention. . . . If we were to elevate political opportunity structure into a general covering law, we would always find movements it cannot "explain" and those that arise as opportunities are clos-

ing. But that has not been the claim of this study. Instead, I have tried to show how movements develop as specific interactions within general phases of contention, depending on the forms of mobilization they employ, their meanings and identities, and the social networks and connective structures on which they build. (Tarrow, 1998b:200)

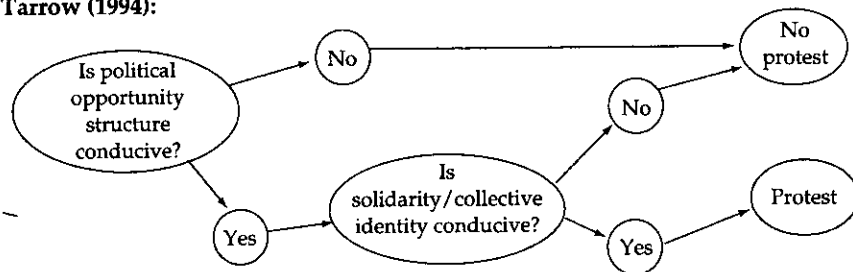
The prose has turned self-referential, and the claims made by the analysis are now made modest. Conducive political opportunities (not structures) no longer allow, but simply play a leading role in triggering, protest, along with other factors. Instead of the structuralist sequencing of factors in the first edition, Tarrow's second edition constructs a probabilistic multivariate model (see figure 8.1).

### IMPLICATIONS OF THE IRANIAN CASE

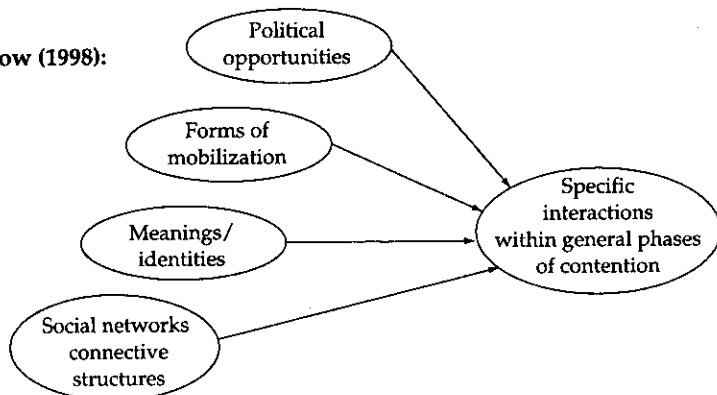
I am proud that part of my work on the Iranian Revolution of 1979 (Kurzman, 1996) is cited by both sides in part I (Meyer, chapter 4; Jaswin, chap-

**FIGURE 8.1**  
Tarrow on Political Contention

Tarrow (1994):



Tarrow (1998):



ter 6), and not just because I want to be liked by everyone. Meyer cites me among other scholars within political process theory who take protesters' beliefs seriously, and who regard opportunity as mediated by belief; Jaswin cite me as concluding that the Iranian Revolution emerged and succeeded despite a lack of political opportunity. I am comfortable with both of these statements, and, if I may be allowed a moment of special pleading, I would like to extend these implications of the Iranian case for two of the methodological points I've just tried to make.

First is taking protesters' beliefs seriously. In the case of the Iranian Revolution, taking protesters' beliefs seriously means recognizing that the leaders of the revolutionary movement were highly skeptical of any liberalizing move on the part of the government (Kurzman, forthcoming). They did not adapt their protests to take advantage of opportunities offered by the Iranian monarchy—when private oppositional meetings were allowed, they held public meetings; when free elections were promised, they refused to participate—and they were scornful of the moderate oppositionists who played by the rules of the game. At the same time, the revolutionaries explicitly rejected the fatalistic implications of other opportunity structures as well: the Islamic opposition's lack of institutional resources (Kurzman, 1994:56–60); the quiescent ideology that dominated Islamic thinking in Iran at the time (Kurzman, 1994:60–63); and socioeconomic conditions from which bazaaris, construction workers, and other clerical supporters were profiting (Kurzman, 2003). All of this suggests either that opportunities cannot be held responsible for the emergence of the revolutionary movement, or that opportunities had an effect that operated behind the backs of the protesters, outside of their consciousness, and despite their best intentions—that is, structurally. There is no middle position—non-structuralist opportunity—in this case.

If protesters' beliefs indicate that the revolutionary movement emerged without opportunity, or even against opportunity, what accounts for the disconnect? Why did the opportunity variable fail? In a separate paper (Kurzman, 2003), I approach this issue by comparing Iran in 1975 with Iran in 1978. "Objective" opportunity was similar in both years, I argue, yet a seminary student protest repressed with casualties in 1975 had virtually no public echo, while a similar event in 1978 quickly became a rallying point for widespread revolutionary protests. What changed in the meantime, I argue, was the revolutionary clerical leaders' perception of the "readiness" of the Iranian people. In 1975, these leaders foresaw a long preparatory period before revolutionary protest would be effective; in late 1977, small protests led these leaders to change their minds and declare Iranians "awakened." With this judgment, they mobilized their cadres and launched numerous, though still small, demonstrations. To abstract from this detail, it seems to me that the movement began because

the revolutionary opposition conceived of opportunities differently than sociologists do, combining judgments of state power, popular ideologies, and risk assessment. Even if sociologists were to agree on how to define opportunity, their definition(s) would not be as important in understanding this case as the protesters' definitions of opportunity; it was the protesters' definition, not ours, that motivated them to mobilize. The concept of opportunity thus dissolves into perceptions of opportunity.

The second point is success without opportunity. If opportunity is a characteristic of actors' environment, and perceived opportunity is a characteristic of actors, the Iranian Revolution appears to be a case where the latter trumps the former. That is, the revolutionary movement arose, gained momentum, and succeeded even in the absence of a conducive environment, as indicated by state breakdown, say, or international constraints on state repression. Not all revolutionary insurrections succeed, even those that are confident of success, so it would be absurd to argue that perceptions always prevail over the environment. One can convince oneself that a brick wall doesn't exist, but running into it will still be painful. The significance of the Iranian Revolution, then, is that—at least once in the recent past—revolutionaries were able to will away the brick wall. That is, their perceptions were self-fulfilling; they were able to generate a movement so strong that the lack of political opportunity didn't matter.

If a movement once trumped an uncondusive environment, then we can no longer explain the failure of other movements simply by documenting the presence of uncondusive environments. We need to ask how uncondusive environments are able to stymie movements. The Iranian Revolution, though it is only a single case, rules out some hypotheses. We know that states cannot subdue revolutions simply by threat of force, since the Iranian monarchy issued many such threats, to no avail. We know that states cannot subdue revolutions simply by arresting and shooting demonstrators, since the shah's government tried that too. Bloodshed spurred protest rather than cowing it. (Perhaps greater or lesser force or different means or targets would have had the opposite effect? How would we know?)

The closer we inspect the brick wall of uncondviveness, the more it looks like trial and error. The state tries threats, or violence, or co-optation, and waits to see what works. What "works" is entirely the product of the protesters' response. Opening fire on a thousand unarmed protesters sitting peacefully in a public square, as the Iranian monarchy did on September 8, 1978 ("Black Friday")—does this cause the survivors and their compatriots to cease and desist protesting, or to redouble their efforts? This is the "double-edged sword" of repression. The back edge—the edge facing the state—can take two forms. If protesters are willing to face prison, torture, and death, or even welcome such fates, then repres-

sion will not faze them. If protesters do not wish to face such a fate but know that many of their compatriots are outraged and expect them to join in protest, then they may decide there is safety in numbers and join as well. I am fond of a metaphor provided by Talcott Parsons (1967:chap. 9), of all people: State coercion is like the reserves of a bank. It is not intended to be drawn on by everyone at once, and if too many people make demands, it will soon run out.

The brick wall of uncondviveness, then, is in a meaningful sense a figment of protesters' imaginations. Its effects lie in protesters' responses to it. How, then, do revolutionary movements ever fail? Clearly, confidence does not always carry the day. The answer lies in the distribution of responses in the population. Revolutionary leaders may be optimistic or ready for martyrdom, but the rest of the country may not be. The distribution of optimism or masochism must be great enough to reach a rolling critical mass for the less optimistic and the more cost-wary to decide to join in. Unfortunately for those who would like to predict the outcome of protest movements, this distribution can probably never be known in advance. What sort of scenario would we present to survey respondents? Could we expect their cost-benefit calculations to be the same in the cool of the moment?

### STRUCTURALISM IS DEAD! LONG LIVE—WHAT?

The "post" prefix makes an awkward label, except perhaps on cereal. Poststructuralism is no exception. It tells us what has gone before, but surely there is a better label for the current consensus in social movement theory. "Conjuncturalism" captures the multivariate tendency, but I prefer "constructionism." It announces the view that people construct their own history—not under circumstances chosen by themselves, certainly, but under circumstances they have the power to change. Opportunity, ultimately, is what people make of it.

Yet if social movement theory has adopted constructionist norms, in that few scholars are willing to defend structuralism any more, the field has not yet fully adopted constructionist methods. Studies of opportunity, in particular political opportunity, still frequently treat it as a structure, not a variable. I propose that three tasks remain before practices catch up with norms.

The first task is establishing probabilistic effect. If opportunity affects social movements only sometimes, as poststructuralist norms insist, then how do we know that it is worth continuing to study? The modal sociological response to such issues is multivariate regression, in which a variable is deemed important if has a statistically significant coefficient, net

of other variables. I am not suggesting that the study of social movements must abandon case studies for regression analysis, but some approach ought to be developed to deal with the issue of multivariate probabilistic effects. Jeff Goodwin's Boolean analysis of opportunity's effect on protest in his forthcoming volume on "opportunistic protest" is an example of this sort of approach.

Constructionist norms about the importance of process imply that the outcome of movements cannot be foreseen in advance. Yet constructionism need not involve a postmodern abdication of causal reasoning, as structuralists sometimes suggest. There's a fair bit of this bogey waved by the defendants in part I, and I think it's misplaced. First, constructionism does not necessarily mean the rejection of causality. One can still order one's analysis analytically and inquire about the relationship of concepts in a causal space. Second, constructionism does not necessarily involve a reduction of the unit of analysis from groups (or groups of cases) to individuals (or individual cases). One can still generalize across a group, so long as the generalization is held to be heuristic. Third, constructionism does not necessarily dissolve patterns into chaos. One can still seek patterns in social life, so long as the patterns are recognized as social constructions. What constructionism changes, then, is the epistemological status of causes and patterns. Let us speak of these as heuristic inventions, not discoveries.

The second task is focusing on mechanisms of effect. In structuralist analysis, one needs only to show correlation between the outcome and conducive structural characteristics. Poststructuralism, by contrast, problematizes the mechanisms of causal effect. Opportunity can no longer be expected to operate automatically, so the question arises: How does it operate? But few studies of social movements address this question. In particular, evidence of "objective" opportunity is too often presented without evidence that protesters were aware of, or motivated by, that opportunity.

Since this chapter was first drafted, a major book by McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) has been published emphasizing this point. The authors acknowledge that they "come from a structuralist tradition" (22), but—as in their contributions to this volume—they repudiate this tradition as static and mechanistic. Opportunity, they say, cannot "invite mobilization unless it is a) visible to potential challengers and b) perceived as an opportunity" (43). They propose to focus on "mechanisms" too, defining mechanisms as "events that alter relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations" (24). This definition, however, leads in a somewhat different direction from the approach that I am trying to propose. It emphasizes patterns across cases—which is fine—but de-emphasizes the subjective percep-

tions that allow causes to have effects. "Mechanism," in the constructionist approach, is an actor's or group's response to a given shift in the environment. There is still a residue of structuralism in McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly's emphasis on shifts rather than responses to shifts.

Does this mean that social movement studies must "take every epoch at its word and believe that everything it says and imagines about itself is true," a position that Karl Marx mocked: "While in ordinary life every shopkeeper is very well able to distinguish between what somebody professes to be and what he really is, our historians have not yet won even this trivial insight" (Marx, 1978 [1845–1846]:175). A constructionist analysis may well privilege the words of the subjects, at the risk of appearing naive to hard-nosed materialists who claim to know a priori what motivates people. But the study of popular perceptions need not stop with the recording of subjects' self-impressions. For example, the way people talk about opportunity may not fit with their consciously expressed self-image—I have interviewed demonstrators who talk about running away from the police, then describe themselves as not afraid to sacrifice for the cause. Such a disjuncture between accounts of actions and accounts of motivation is itself an interesting finding that only comes from focusing on mechanisms of effect.

This does not mean that opportunity is meaningless. I could hardly hold that position, having participated in extensions of the concept of political opportunity in recent work to organizations (Kurzman, 1998) and to the international polity (Barrett and Kurzman, n.d.). What I propose is that opportunity should be operationalized primarily as perceived opportunity, as a characteristic that protesters impute to their environment. Opportunity references protesters' relation with external actors, in the same way that "network" references their relations with one another, and "frame" references their relations to broader cultural contexts. Constructionism turns each of these "structural" factors into distributions of perceptions: perceptions of the political environment and what can feasibly be accomplished, of social ties and what can be expected of them, of cultural norms and their application to a given movement.

The third task is exploring deviant cases. If the effect of opportunity is probabilistic, then there must be—and are, as Tarrow (1998:200) noted in the block quote above—cases in which opportunity exists but no protest occurs (or succeeds), and cases where no opportunity exists but protest occurs (or succeeds) anyway. These cases appear to be far less frequently studied than cases where opportunities and outcomes run hand in hand, but—regardless of the frequency of such cases, which is unknown—deviant cases are important for further developing the theory of opportunity in a non-structuralist direction. Cases of opportunity-without-protest address the question: When is opportunity effective? Cases of protest-

without-opportunity address the question: Is opportunity as important as other factors?

The central disagreement in part I, I suggest, is whether "political process theory" can accommodate these questions and the constructionist norms that motivate them. Jaswin argue that introducing such questions subverts the structuralist principles upon which political process theory was originally based; the defendants argue that those principles were never ironclad, so political process theory not only can accommodate constructionism but already has. I don't care much whether the label "political process theory" gets applied to current and future research. What I think is important is to recognize that an underlying shift has occurred, from structuralism to constructionism, and that living up to the implications of our constructionist norms will change how we study social movements.

## 9

## The Intellectual Challenges of Toiling in the Vineyard

MARC W. STEINBERG

In her treatise on Eastern American viticulture Lucie Morton counsels that "Training and pruning is one of the most intellectually challenging jobs for vineyardists" (1985:151). She also notes that although the grafting of vines on to different rootstocks can have many benefits for fruit bearing, it can also significantly add to the costs of maintaining the vineyard (1985:30). Morton's expertise of course is grape growing, but her treatise gives me pause to wonder if she at least minored in sociology as an undergraduate. In this volume we see divergent views of how we should be toiling in the vineyards to cultivate the vines. Some of our contributors suggest that we have paid insufficient attention to training and pruning; others argue that the critiques and alternative strategies amount to a type of hacking rather than pruning.

In this chapter I argue that the issues raised by all of our contributors are cogent, though the bases upon which they raise them are somewhat misplaced. Entangled in some of the snarls, I suggest that many of our contributors lose sight of the vine itself and how it grows. I maintain that there is greater agreement on understandings of causality than an initial reading of these essays indicates. In addition, I offer different conceptions of *structure* and *culture*, two of the key terms in this dialogue, and consider how the reframing of these terms shifts the focus of our intellectual challenges. Finally, I provide an example of how the more fully relational conception of causality that I proffer can be used to think through the ways in which we analyze opportunities for contention.