

Culture and Its Discontents: Recent Theorizing on the Cultural Dimensions of Protest*

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Recent analyses of the cultural dimensions of protest have gone some distance in correcting the structuralist and instrumentalist biases of early resource mobilization and political process models. They remain limited, however, by their retention of dichotomous conceptions of culture and structure in the emergence of protest, of cultural and instrumental orientations in ongoing collective action, and of cultural and political targets of protest. As a result, they have neglected, respectively, continuities between structured inequalities and the movement challenges that are made to them, the cultural shaping of instrumentally rational decisionmaking, and the strategic possibilities that lay in cultural challenge made within the sphere of institutional politics. I draw on recent theorizing in the sociology of culture and on several case studies of collective action in order to highlight these lacunae and to propose analytical alternatives.

More than providing the social psychology of individual participation missing from early resource mobilization accounts, recent treatments of the cultural dimensions of protest have begun to reconceptualize the very terms of movement theorizing. Political “opportunities” should be expanded to include the contradictions and gaps in dominant ideologies which trigger opposition, they argue (McAdam 1994; Fantasia and Hirsch 1995); movement “resources” made to encompass compelling narratives and traditions of protest (Morris 1984; Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986; Snow and Benford 1988; 1992; Klandermans 1988). And movement “success” should be judged not only by the number of officials elected, legislation passed, and policies changed, but by the transformations wrought in culture and consciousness, in collective self-definitions, and in the meanings that shape everyday life (Sturgeon 1995; Melucci 1995a; 1995b; Lipsitz 1988; Flacks 1995).

These reconceptualizations and the empirical analyses which have accompanied them have gone some distance in correcting the structuralist and instrumentalist biases of earlier models. They remain limited, however, by their retention of dichotomous conceptions of culture and structure in the emergence of protest, of cultural and instrumental orientations in ongoing collective action, and of cultural and political targets of collective action. As a result, they have neglected, respectively, the continuities between structured inequalities and the movement challenge that is made to them, the cultural shaping of instrumentally

rational decisionmaking, and the strategic possibilities that lay in cultural challenge made within the sphere of institutional politics.

To be sure, as Margaret Archer (1988) points out with respect to the culture/structure dichotomy, we should be wary not only of reducing structure to culture or vice versa but of seeing them as so thoroughly mutually constitutive as to preclude exploration of their *interplay*. Granting the terms analytic autonomy then, my purpose here is to show how better specification of the ways in which culture and structure, culture and strategy, and culture and politics interact exposes important and thus far neglected dynamics of collective action.

Since questions about the autonomy, malleability, and boundaries of the cultural have animated debates in the sociology of culture for some time, my discussion benefits from that literature. But closer empirical study of actual episodes of collective action also undermines the assumptions I have described, and I draw on several empirical analyses to illuminate lacunae in recent theoretical formulations and to propose alternatives.

Culture versus Structure

Social movement scholars' growing attentiveness to the cultural roots of social protest reflects several developments: dissatisfaction with early resource mobilization models' deliberate indifference to grievances and goals; a "linguistic turn" in the humanities and social sciences that has focused on the action and identity-constitutive dimensions of language; and the primacy of cultural challenge in the so-called "new social movements." Most American researchers have been uncomfortable with the new social movement/old social movement divide, calling rather for exploration of the cultural roots of many social movements (Calhoun 1994; Hunt, Benford, and Snow 1994; Johnston and Klandermans 1995; Mueller 1994; Plotke 1990). Contrary, then, to earlier collective behaviorist accounts of activists' beliefs as fantastical adaptations to system strain, they characterize the cultural challenge that precedes insurgency as a *rational* bid to debunk dominant ideologies. And contrary to first generation resource mobilization theorists, they assert that culture *matters* in accounting for insurgency.

But how and when does it matter? When does cultural challenge become a mobilizing force? I quote several answers to that question. "Explicit cultural ideologies emerge *during 'unsettled' historical periods* when such coherent systematic worldviews can powerfully influence their adherents" (Swidler 1995, p. 34; my emphasis). "*During certain moments of economic and political turbulence* long-standing social relations become more permeable to innovations and inventions, to the challenges mounted by subordinate groups seeking redress" (Jenson 1995, p. 108; my emphasis). "*In the context of acute social conflict* . . . subcultural havens may become oppositional or countercultural social spaces that are capable of being mobilized by movements, thus posing a direct threat to

elites" (Fantasia and Hirsch 1995, p. 157; my emphasis). "During crises . . . different ways of doing things are now conceivable to policymakers and the public" (Hart 1992, p. 640). "*In unsettled times and periods of crisis*, mobilizing collectivities reject old cultural models and articulate new ones" (Johnston and Klantner 1995, p. 8; my emphasis). "Culture plays an essential role *during such unsettled periods*, acting as a toolkit or repertoire from which people construct new strategies of action" (Klatch 1995, p. 82; my emphasis).

The argument for culture in these strikingly similar formulations is a weak rather than strong one: cultural challenge is possible and/or matters when social, political, and economic structures have become unstable. But that position raises thorny questions. If counterhegemonic discourse becomes effective only when structural conditions are destabilized, then shouldn't we be studying the structural factors generating disequilibrium rather than the cultural challenge that only then comes into play? On the other hand, is there ever a time when societies are thoroughly stable? And can't social movements themselves contribute to destabilizing the institutional logics that inform everyday life?

A metaphor of structural rupture, with its suggestion of total discontinuity between stability and insurgency, and between structure and countercultural challenge, thus still characterizes even self-consciously culturalist accounts. This obscures the cultural dimensions of political and economic structures and opportunities. Doug McAdam observes,

It is extremely hard to separate these objective shifts in political opportunities from the subjective processes of social construction and collective attribution that render them meaningful . . . Given this linkage, the movement analyst has two tasks: accounting for the structural factors that have objectively strengthened the challenger's hand, and analyzing the processes by which the meaning and attributed significance of shifting political conditions is assessed (1994, p. 39).

McAdam still insists on distinguishing "objective" opportunities from the "subjective, cultural" framing of those opportunities. Culture, on McAdam's view, mediates between objective political opportunities and objective mobilization; it does not create those opportunities.

It seems, though, that in some ways culture *does* create political opportunities, and not just in the "subjective" perceptions of mobilizers. As Gamson and Meyer (1996) point out, differing political opportunity structures reflect not just different political systems (for example, limits on the executive branch and a system of checks and balances) but also different conceptions of the proper scope and role of the state. State-makers and managers, like challengers, are suspended in webs of meaning, as Jeff Goodwin notes in urging attention to "the ways in which state officials' ideological commitments, moral assumptions, 'policy styles,' and collective identities help to shape particular state policies and institutions" (1994, p. 760). Movements themselves can create political opportunities

through altered cultural perceptions. For example, a movement may be responsible for lowering the level of state repression that is considered legitimate and that can therefore be deployed against subsequent challenges (della Porta 1996).¹

Structures, in Sewell's (1992) persuasive definition, are cultural schemas invested with and sustaining resources, in other words, schemas that reflect and reproduce unevenly distributed power. Such a view suggests that the stable or "settled" character of social structures depends on an active reproduction of meanings, meanings that are always contestable. It thus awards more power to cultural challenge to destabilize obdurate institutional arrangements.

At the same time, Sewell's formulation alerts us to continuities between existing relations and the challenge that opposes them. Just as a too-rigid distinction between culture and structure neglects the cultural dimensions of structural opportunities, it also neglects the "structuring" of cultural challenge, that is, its reproduction of broader asymmetries of power.

Recent discussions of "free spaces" illustrate the last point. I take the term from Evans and Boyte (1986; see also Morris 1993; Couto 1993; Rossinow 1994), but a number of authors have referred to the same phenomenon by other names: "havens" (Hirsch 1990; Fantasia and Hirsch 1995); "spatial preserves" (Fantasia and Hirsch 1995); "safe spaces" (Gamson 1996); "cultural laboratories" (Muel-ler 1994); "spheres of cultural autonomy" (Taylor and Whittier 1995); "sequestered social sites" (Scott 1990); "social spaces" (Calhoun 1983). For each of these writers, the concept refers to small-scale settings within a community or movement that are removed from the direct control of dominant groups, are voluntarily participated in, and are generative of the cultural challenge that precedes political mobilization.

Thus the southern Black church, removed from White control and central to the life of Black communities, provided the emerging civil rights movement meeting places for developing strategy and commitment, a network of charismatic movement leaders, and an idiom that persuasively joined Constitutional ideals with Christian ones (Morris 1984; Evans and Boyte 1986).

The southern civil rights movement itself, and particularly the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), in another frequently cited example, gave White women the organizing skills and networks that were essential to the emergence of radical feminism. It also gave them the ideological room to begin to question the gap between male activists' radically egalitarian ethos and their sexist behavior. "Within the broader social space of the movement," Sara Evans writes, "women found a specifically female social space in which to discuss their experiences, share insights, and find group strength as they worked in the office or met on the margins of big meetings" (1986, p. 102).

The free spaces concept thus permits recognition of the usually constraining operation of common sense while refusing the across-the-board mystification of

dominant ideology theses. As Eric Hirsch puts it, "Havens insulate the challenging group from the rationalizing ideologies normally disseminated by the society's dominant group" (1990, p. 206; see also Mueller 1994; Taylor 1989; Gamson 1991; Friedman and McAdam 1992). Counterhegemonic challenge comes not from some disembodied oppositional consciousness but from long-standing community institutions where people are able to penetrate the common sense that keeps most passive in the face of injustice. Free spaces seem to provide institutional anchor for the cultural challenge that explodes structural arrangements.

The free space metaphor is a rich one. Unfortunately the metaphor itself is forced to carry too much of the burden of explanation. What is it about free spaces that makes them free? Why are certain sites generative of counterhegemonic challenge? Do all oppressed groups have free spaces? If not, then under what circumstances do such sites emerge? How is the countercultural challenge nurtured in the free space translated into active mobilization?

With respect to the first two questions, discussions of free spaces have tended to forego detailed analysis in favor of an assumption that counterhegemonic challenge is a function of the subordinated group's social exclusion, that is, its economic, political, social, and spatial marginalization, combined with the free space's removal from the direct surveillance of authorities. In other words, given a meeting place, groups who are structurally isolated will penetrate and reject the cultural codes that legitimate their subordination.

Free spaces are thus a kind of structural black hole: countercultural challenge is assumed to emerge where structure is suspended. Yet how different is the contention that protest emerges *where* structure is suspended from the now-discredited collective behaviorist argument that protest emerges *when* structure breaks down? There are several liabilities to such a view, among them its neglect of *continuities* between structured relations and the challenge that is made to them. While the writers I cited generally recognize that free spaces are not entirely immune to parochial beliefs (cf. Evans and Boyte 1986, p. 19), they have not gone beyond that acknowledgment to probe how fledgling movements are advanced or impeded, and their content influenced by broader meanings and patterned relations.²

Fuller examination of two free spaces often represented as paradigmatic sheds light on those processes. First, without negating the vitally important role of southern Black churches in nurturing and sustaining southern civil rights protest, evidence suggests that in many southern communities, particularly rural ones, Black ministers were not the shock troops of the struggle. Field reports by student organizers in the early 1960s make clear that many ministers were reluctant converts to the cause.³ Ministers' timidity often stemmed from their financial dependence on Whites: whereas in southern cities, ministers' livelihoods came entirely from their parishioners, in rural areas most were forced to work part time for

Whites and were therefore more vulnerable to economic reprisals (Payne 1995). In addition, church leaders sometimes enjoyed a position of brokerage with powerful Whites and were compensated in some fashion for serving as advocates of only moderate reform. This role was threatened by the development of new leaders, whether student organizers or Black residents. The line between some ministers' perception of the pace of change that was best for their flocks and their own interests in maintaining a position of leadership was murky. In these cases, organized collective action required challenging leadership *within* the disenfranchised community.

It seems that in the civil rights movement, "outsiders" played a crucial role in that task. With neither money, federal backing, nor physical protection, student organizers who moved into rural areas in Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia in the early 1960s could provide Black residents little incentive to mobilize. What they did offer was a willingness to stand up to White authorities *and* a willingness to defy the counsel of old-line Black leaders. SNCC workers' attack on "qualifications" was aimed not only at debunking the notion that Blacks lacked the capacity to participate politically, but also at breaking down the patterns of deference that kept less well-educated, poorer Black citizens from claiming leadership of the movement.⁴

Southern ministers who were initially wary sometimes did come around to supporting and, indeed, leading the struggle. It seems that the most successful organizers managed to persuade, cajole, or help residents to push traditional leaders into an active role rather than circumvent them altogether. The role of outsiders in this case, and perhaps in others, was not to empower a powerless group or to enlighten the falsely conscious, but to challenge the structured relations within the group that channeled resistance in an accommodationist direction. A view of free spaces as untrammelled by relations of power and authority obscures this dynamic in the emergence of organized protest.

Contrary to historical accounts—Sara Evans's (1979) seminal piece and the host that have followed her (Buechler 1990; Echols 1989; Evans and Boyte 1986; Gitlin 1987; McAdam 1992)—it seems that outsiders were also crucial in the emergence of a feminist challenge within the SNCC. In November 1964 a position paper on sexism in the movement was floated anonymously at a SNCC staff retreat. Evans attributed the paper to two White SNCC veterans: Casey Hayden, who had been involved with SNCC since its founding in 1960, and Mary King, who joined in 1962. On Evans's account, Hayden and King's conversations with other women about their second-class status in SNCC and discussions of the writings of de Beauvoir, Lessing, and Friedan culminated in their decision to bring up the issue to the SNCC staff. The paper they wrote documented a range of sexist practices—women relegated to minute-taking duties, rarely given projects to direct, never made SNCC spokespeople—and called on the group to extend its egalitarian commitment to women.

For Evans and subsequent chroniclers, the fact that the memo was written by longtime SNCCers suggested that in spite of their circumscribed role as women, Hayden and King had the freedom to explore this “new” source of oppression, toy with unconventional ideas, and experiment with new roles. It suggested that SNCC was indeed a kind of cultural laboratory for radical ideas. A year after the first memo was met with the laughter and derision they had anticipated, Evans goes on, King and Hayden collaborated on a second memo, directed to Black and White women active in the civil rights and new left movements. Its effect, by all accounts, was galvanizing and spurred women to build the networks and consciousness-raising groups that would eventually explode into radical feminism.

In fact, new testimony suggests that a larger group, including several northern White women who had only recently joined SNCC, wrote the first anonymous memo in November 1964.⁵ According to veterans and newcomers, the latter brought a “northern” aggressiveness that made them able to challenge not only the group loyalty that made criticism difficult, but also the norms of deference that structured White women’s relations to the mainly Black men who headed SNCC. Taking meeting minutes, not seeking the higher status job of field organizer, not competing for the public limelight—White women veterans understood these as *choices*, made because of their unwillingness to endanger Black residents by serving as field organizers, but also because they saw the movement as properly led by Black men. It was easier for women who were longtime members of the group to see an auxiliary role as consonant with the group’s radically egalitarian ethos. And it was easier for women from outside that culture (a culture they say was regional *and* organizational) to name it as inequality.

My interviews with SNCC women also indicate that although the anonymous memo on women detailed episodes of work-related discrimination, the conversations that preceded it were often about *sex*. In the privacy of the “freedom house” where they were living, a small group of mainly White women talked about sexual relationships that were often brief and impersonal, “alienating,” as they put it. Sex, rather than just a lack of responsibility on the job, connected their more theoretical discussions about gender and their experiences in the movement. But to talk about those topics in a staff meeting was inconceivable. “Are you nuts?” one participant asks now. Grievances about inequities in sexual relations were seen as personal, private, and not properly expressed in a staff meeting.

The framing that was chosen (that is, the focus on work inequities) made it easy for other staffers to dismiss the memo. The charges it made were belied by many Black SNCC women’s experience of directing projects and running programs. Moreover, in a climate of intragroup racial tensions, when some Black women believed that White women were coddled, and the organization as a whole was wracked by confusion about its future, complaints about having to take meeting minutes seemed trivial. The larger point is that demarcations of private and

public, or personal and political, influence claims-making within movements as well as outside them. Even within free spaces, even within a movement dedicated to transforming personal relations as well as institutional ones, issues that were in retrospect political were dismissed as personal and were excluded from the pool of legitimate, discussible grievances.⁶

SNCC, the Black church, Black colleges for the civil rights movement (Morris 1984), saloons and union halls for working-class insurgency (Evans and Boyte 1986; Hirsch 1990), Christian "base communities" for El Salvadoran insurgency (Gamson 1991)—each of these settings has generated not only the networks, skills, and strategies necessary to challenge dominant arrangements but has generated the collective identities and interests that preceded mobilization. My discussion of the Black church and SNCC has accepted each setting as generative of social protest but asks how its enmeshment in broader cultural structures shaped the challenge it issued, namely the relations of deference and brokerage that characterize marginalized groups and the conceptions of public and private that remove certain grievances from public discussions. Fuller specification of the culture/structure relationship thus alerts us both to the greater capacities of cultural challenge to destabilize institutional arrangements and, at the same time, to the obstacles that stand between cultural challenge and full fledged mobilization.

Cultural versus Instrumental Action

Early resource mobilization and political process models implicitly held to a view of movement leaders choosing among decisional options on the basis of a classically rational assessment of environmental opportunities and constraints, assessment that was free from the influence of normative commitments. Theorists of collective action "framing," by contrast, have attempted to expose the role of normative commitments in decisionmaking. However, their retention of an implicit dichotomy between cultural (or, better, ideological) and strategic orientations to action has undermined their analyses. Let me review briefly formulations advanced by Snow and Benford (1992) and Downey (1986).

Building on their discussion of movement leaders' use of persuasive rhetoric to mobilize participants and supporters, Snow and Benford write, "movement tactics are not solely a function of environmental constraints and adaptations, but are also constrained by anchoring master frames" (1992, p. 146). Master frames are broad interpretive templates through which movements clustered temporally and ideologically explain and attribute blame for the problem they are trying to ameliorate. Frames like "civil rights" or "Black Power" limit tactical innovation by ruling out certain strategies which are ideologically incompatible. Decisions are thus shaped not only by the strategic imperatives of retaining rank and file support, steady funding, and freedom from repression but also by activists' explicit normative commitments.

The weakness of this formulation lies in its understanding of master frames as deliberately chosen worldviews, which can be embraced or suspended depending on leaders' perceptions of strategic imperatives. A master frame thus constrains tactical options insofar as it figures as one more strategic consideration—along with adapting to the demands of an external environment and an internal movement constituency—that leaders must take into account. What is missing is a recognition that definitions of “strategic,” “instrumental,” and “rational” are themselves shaped by prevailing ideological frames. Absent that recognition, Snow and Benford's formulation reproduces the Parsonsian division between instrumental and cultural spheres of social action, with the former guided by objective norms of rationality and the latter by cultural commitments and assumptions (Dobbin 1994).

The same dichotomy is evident in Gary Downey's (1986) otherwise persuasive account of the ideological shaping of tactical options among members of an antinuclear group. Downey shows that the Clamshell Alliance's antinuclear identity—simultaneously “opponent” of the atomic-industrial establishment, dedicated to stopping nuclear power, and its “opposite,” seeking to eradicate domination within its own operation—was responsible for its distinctive strategies of consensus decisionmaking and nonviolent civil disobedience. The ideological commitment was also responsible for the group's demise, however, as the competing demands of consensus-based and rapid deliberation (each reflective of components of its core identity) caused debilitating rifts within the group.

Downey explicitly challenges the ideology-plus-strategic-imperatives formulation that limits Snow and Benford's analysis by conceptualizing ideology as a lens through which strategy is assessed. “Ideology appears not as a variable interacting with changing resources and strategies . . . but as one meaningful or symbolic precondition of their existence . . . ideologies always contribute to the definition of organizational resources and strategies” (1986, p. 371). Ideologies change, “but ideologies are seen in this framework as coming from other ideologies, and specific changes are never pure causal responses to changes in social circumstances” (p. 371).

However, Downey's empirical analysis undercuts his argument. Although he is careful to describe the conflict between consensus-based and effective decisionmaking in the Alliance as “developing” rather than intrinsic, his labeling of the group's competing commitments as “instrumental” and “egalitarian” makes it difficult to see the latter *as* instrumental. This then obscures the ideological shift through which the practices associated with an egalitarian commitment came to be seen as at odds with an instrumental one, and leads to confusing statements like the following: “others implicitly emphasized egalitarianism [at the expense of instrumentalism] . . . by arguing that a plant occupation was not successful if it did not produce a ‘grassroots movement’” (p. 370). One wonders why

galvanizing local activism was not viewed as an instrumental concern. To understand such an assessment would require a fuller understanding than Downey provides of the changing meanings of instrumental rationality within the group. Otherwise, his challenge to the argument that ideologies change in response to changed circumstances, unmediated by ideology, remains unsubstantiated.

Downey further undercuts his argument by circumscribing its scope:

The uniqueness of the Clamshell case suggests that there may be significant variation in the extent to which ideological identities constrain the selection of resources and strategies and, therefore, in the extent to which the understanding of resource mobilization depends upon the analysis of identities. (p. 371)

This qualification suggests that many movement groups may be able to engage in a purely strategic calculation of costs and benefits in selecting among tactics, uncontaminated, as it were, by cultural presuppositions. It suggests a narrow understanding of the culture/strategy relationship: self-consciously ideological commitments delimit transparently strategic options only in certain situations.

Such an account rests on a view that, as Meyer, Boli, and Thomas put it, "the encompassing environment [is] largely culturally vacuous—a set of raw resources, opportunities, or constraints" (1994, p. 14). Meyer and other "new institutionalist" theorists of organization argue, to the contrary, that the environment to which organizational actors struggle to adapt is rife with culture. Norms of instrumental rationality are cultural rather than transcendental; organizations operate not on the basis of objective criteria of efficiency but in tune with the routines, rituals, and myths which stipulate appropriate organizational forms and practices (see essays in Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Zucker 1988; Meyer and Scott 1994; review in Dobbin 1994).

This perspective, not yet fully plumbed by sociologists of social movements, offers important insights into the cultural shaping of instrumental decisionmaking. It suggests that broad semiotic templates mold movement organizations' vocabularies of protest, their understandings of what is feasible, strategic, and legitimate. For example, neo-institutionalists have shown how organizations adopt a strategy or administrative form in imitation of other organizations not because the innovation has been proven to yield more efficient outcomes but because "everyone is doing it" (Friedland and Alford 1991; Dobbin 1994; DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Fligstein 1990; Tolbert and Zucker 1983). Similarly, movement organizations may style themselves after forerunners not because of their superior track record but because for idiosyncratic reasons their operating style has come to be seen as the standard.

I would suggest that institutionalized understandings of instrumental rationality may also reflect more local and transient symbolic associations. For example, in my analysis of decisionmaking in SNCC, I found, like other chroniclers, that

SNCC's deliberations changed significantly between 1964 and 1965 (Carson 1981; Ciecak 1981; Forman 1985; King 1992; Stoper 1989). From an emphasis on consensus-based, fully participatory, and decentralized decisionmaking, SNCC shifted to a more centralized and hierarchical style. Unlike most analysts, however, I have not attributed that shift to the environmental changes that forced the group to abandon its ideological commitment to participatory democracy in favor of greater efficiency. On that view, SNCC's sudden expansion in size and stature made consensus-based and rigorously moral decisionmaking, which had always been in tension with the demands of strategic action, simply too unwieldy to sustain. I argue, to the contrary, that the former participatory democratic style of decisionmaking was initially adopted and maintained and later lobbied for by many within SNCC because it was seen *as strategic*. Participatory decisionmaking within SNCC and its projects was intended to school local Mississippi Black residents in the practice of political leadership, was intended to prevent the co-optation of leaders that SNCC workers saw as endemic to Black politics, and was seen as essential to sustaining the commitment of underpaid and overworked organizers.

What changed after 1964 was not the *evaluation* of normative relative to instrumental commitments but rather the *meaning* of instrumental rationality. The change reflected in part the symbolic associations attached to different styles of deliberation. A participatory, consensus-based, and moralist style of decisionmaking was rejected in SNCC when it came to be held responsible for the organization's programmatic paralysis and when it came to be viewed as the prerogative, indeed the conceit, of White workers. A self-consciously strategic decisional style came to symbolize programmatic certainty and a Black orientation.

I say symbolize because the connections between deliberative modes on the one hand and programmatic clarity and the role of Whites on the other were not explicitly causal but metonymic. Faced in late 1964 with the dissolution of the programmatic vision that had animated their organizing work, SNCC workers turned to battling over structure and decisionmaking within the organization. The competing positions which emerged—"hardliner" advocates of tight structure and top-down management versus "freedom high" proponents of decentralized organization and personal freedom—did not reflect deeper political agendas or ideological visions but rather substituted for thrashing them out.

Similarly, the association of an ineffectual and self-indulgent "freedom high" position with Whites reflected barely articulated feelings of racial animosity on the part of Black staffers. Implementing centralized, hierarchical, and strategic decisionmaking reflected a hope for programmatic clarity and an inchoate antipathy to White organizers rather than an explicit claim that those deliberative practices would supply programs or curb the role of Whites. A new conception of rationality was institutionalized in SNCC not because of its demonstrated capacity

to yield more effective outcomes, and not even because of explicit claims of such a capacity but because of its powerful symbolic connotations within the group.

This episode suggests that fuller understanding of the courses of action taken by social movement organizations requires analysis not only of activists' attempts to reconcile instrumental and ideological imperatives but of what instrumental rationality means and stands for within a given culture. The symbolic associations underpinning criteria of instrumental rationality may be global and epochal (for example, those associated with modern Western rationalization) or more local, specific to a movement or organizational culture, and of recent origin.

Culture versus Politics as Terrain of Protest

So far I've argued that dichotomous conceptions of culture and structure and of culture and instrumental rationality have undermined attempts to map the cultural dimensions of collective action. Assessments of movement outcomes have been limited by a third dichotomy, that between cultural and political spheres of social life. Each of these limited-because-dichotomous perspectives has strategic implications as well as analytical ones. The first suggests that movement actors should be alert to the reproduction of asymmetrical social relations even in "free spaces"; the second, that a preoccupation with decisionmaking may be substituting for the harder work of formulating movement goals. The strategic implications of the third dichotomy are sharpest. A bifurcated conception of movement consequences has led some writers to advocate, misguidedly, an abdication of the institutional political sphere in favor of projects of cultural challenge.

Almost all accounts of the "new social movements" have located their novelty in their orientation to culture and civil society rather than to the state and economy (*inter alia* Feher and Heller 1983; Fuentes and Frank 1989; Melucci 1985; 1989; Offe 1985). An assumption underpinning these accounts is that cultural challenge is effected outside the institutional political sphere. Accordingly, movements are represented as engaged either in cultural protest or in political/economic reform. For example, Darnovsky, Epstein, and Flacks refer to "movements, or tendencies within movements, that want to change cultural and social assumptions *rather than* challenge political and economic policies and rules" (1995, p. xv; my emphasis). Feher and Heller describe the new social movements as "not directly political in character" (1983, p. 37). Alberto Melucci writes that movements in the last twenty years "have not expressed themselves through political action, but rather have raised cultural challenges to the dominant language, to the codes that organize information and shape social practices" (1995a, p. 41).

This assumption is often paired with a second: that changes in personal and collective self-definition are broader, deeper, more enduring, or otherwise more important than institutional reform. Consider statements like the following:

"*large-scale* social change is accomplished in face-to-face relations, at the level of personal identity and consciousness, in the household and neighborhood, *whether or not such change* is enunciated in public policy and macro-level power relations" (Darnovsky, Epstein, and Flacks 1995, p. xiv; my emphasis); "[W]e must understand the social changes of the 1960s not just in terms of organizational goals or structural change, but rather we must look at the *broader impact*, the ways that the movements—and the counterculture—opened up new ideas and actions that were previously unthinkable" (Klatch 1995, p. 83; my emphasis); "*lasting* political change takes place as people 'supplant one 'moral-intellectual' universe with another'" (Hunter 1995, p. 332, quoting Cocks [1989]; my emphasis); "[this analysis] challenges the uncritical acceptance of the metaphor of 'inclusion-exclusion' that is preferred by elite theories of power and emphasizes the *concrete* effects of the movement's intervention on the terrain of hegemonic contestation over political meanings" (Sturgeon 1995, p. 43).

Perhaps changes in cultural perceptions *are* more lasting than are changes in laws and policies (although institutional practices have often persisted in the face of broad cultural shifts). Perhaps people's lives are more substantially improved by psychic transformation than by institutional change. (And perhaps winning a contest over hegemonic meaning is more concrete than winning political power.) But these are claims that remain to be substantiated. More importantly, when joined, the assumptions that challenging groups have to choose either political institutional reform or cultural challenge, and that cultural change is by definition more consequential than political institutional change, make continued engagement with the state a lesser option.

In fact, many so-called new social movements continue to target the state, combining legislative, electoral, and/or litigational activities with more self-consciously cultural efforts (Hunter 1995; Mayer and Roth 1995; Scott 1990; Weir 1993). Dichotomizing the two thrusts forecloses important questions about when and why movement organizations may turn from one to the other (questions explored by Mayer and Roth 1995; Bernstein 1996). It also forecloses analysis of cultural challenges made *within* the institutional political sphere. For example, Omi and Winant (1994) outline a strategy of exposing the authoritative constructions of identity, agency, and history that structure governmental budgetary, allocational, siting, taxation, and fiscal policies. These are areas of political functioning that are typically "insulated" from democratic intervention, the authors point out. But their operational cultural logics can be exposed and subjected to public challenge.

Likewise, demands for the official recognition of new identities can involve more than extending the queue of legitimate claimants on the state. Zillah Eisenstein (1990) has argued for centering reproductive rights discourse on the rights

of “pregnant women of color.” That formulation, she contends, would foreground the needs of Black and Latina women in order to push rights discourse to encompass women’s claims to health care, teenage counseling, and prenatal care. By putting individual choice within a context of race, class, and gender inequities, it would make clear that access for groups within the category of “women” requires more than system adjustment. My analysis of mid-1960s civil rights activism shows that demands for political representation by and for the “unqualified” challenged the convention of political bargaining by elite “representatives” (Polletta 1994b).

Stanley Aronowitz (1995) argues that the AIDS activist group ACT-UP has challenged, in some cases successfully, the subordination of service provision to the fiscal “imperatives” of private sector growth (which other health advocacy groups and labor unions by and large have accepted) by refusing the *ethical* legitimacy of electoral majoritarian rule. “If the majority accepts or otherwise acquiesces to the institutionalized homophobia of the state . . . citizens are under no obligation to obey the law and rules of conduct prescribed in its name” (1995, p. 362). Without abandoning an engagement with the state, ACT-UP has deployed a media strategy of exposure and public embarrassment—a politics of “disrespect”—to recast the battle as one about substantive justice rather than procedural representation. The strategies described by Eisenstein, Aronowitz, and me each refuse the limitations of conventional notions of individual rights and group representation while laying claim to the substantial resources of the state.

Projects like these suggest that defenders of cultural politics may be giving up the turf of institutional politics too easily.⁷ Their acceptance of a division between the political and the cultural, with identity politics and cultural challenge properly targeting the latter, misses the possibility that new constructions of identity made in and through institutional political challenge may have transformative consequences.

Conclusion

Culturalist perspectives on social protest have made great strides in correcting the structuralist and instrumentalist bias of earlier resource mobilization accounts. However, they remain limited by narrow definitions of culture, structure, rationality, and politics. In the foregoing, I have objected to an analysis of the conditions for collective action that underestimates on the one hand the role of cultural challenge in destabilizing structural arrangements and on the other the structuring of cultural challenges, to an analysis of movement decisionmaking that shirks full recognition of the cultural constitution of instrumental rationality, and to a reified distinction between cultural and political spheres that neglects strategic possibilities within institutional politics.

Conceptualizing social categories in dichotomous terms obviously precludes

analysis of the interplay of each side of the dichotomy. It also defines each term by analogy to other dichotomized terms. Thus, with no attempt to substantiate the claims implicitly made, culture becomes “subjective” and structure “objective,” self-consciously normative orientations become “cultural” and strategic ones “acultural,” and culture becomes “deep” and politics “superficial.” I’ve tried to identify some of the conceptual and strategic possibilities that are thereby obscured; there are others.

The most compelling challenges to these dichotomies come from actual social movements, and I conclude by joining the chorus of those calling for more empirical work, especially comparative, on the circumstances in which culture inspires, impedes, and shapes collective action. If alert to the dangers both of totalizing culture and of treating as ontological the analytical distinctions between culture and other categories, such investigation promises rich and rigorous analyses.

ENDNOTES

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¹McAdam (1994; 1995) recognizes the importance of the “cultural opportunities” which facilitate movement emergence. But he distinguishes between political opportunities and cultural opportunities, and fails to specify the relationship, if any, between the two. Missing from his account is thus the possibility that culture does not just mediate but *creates* political opportunities.

²The popularity of the metaphor may also gloss over important distinctions between different kinds of free spaces and the dynamics associated with them. For example, it seems important to distinguish between free spaces within nonmobilized communities and already-formed movements. Another, sometimes overlapping, distinction is between free spaces that are intended by their participants as exclusive (for example, the consciousness-raising groups of the women’s movement) and those that are involuntarily segregated (for example, the civil rights era southern Black church). Another potentially important, and sometimes overlapping, distinction is between free spaces located in more and less repressive regimes—in the latter, one suspects, more emphasis is placed on challenging the cultural codes that normalize power than on planning how to battle overt forms of physical, economic, and political repression (compare, for example, the free spaces described by Johnston 1996 and Gamson 1996). Note, however, that freedom from the direct surveillance of authorities should not be confused with freedom from authorities’ control. While Whites rarely attended Black southern churches, they did exercise control through the threat of economic and/or physical retaliation.

³Carson 1986; Payne 1995; Polletta 1994a; interviews with Muriel Tillinghast, New York, June 5, 1996; Robert Mants, Lowndesboro, Alabama, July 25–29; field reports and meeting minutes in Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers microfilm, see especially “Minutes of SNCC staff meeting” [3/6/62], reel 3 #798–800; “First Report from Lee County” [7/1/62], reel 19 #839; “Lincoln County voter Education Project, Week of August 25–31” [1963], reel 7 #238; untitled field report, 11/8/63, reel 5 #964; “Jerry Casey Field Report” [n.d.], reel 7 #1019; MFDP Newsletter no. 3, 4/24/65, reel 41 #708–709; “Fifth Congressional District Report, General Report on Laurel,” October 1964, reel 20 #176–185.

⁴One might argue that the movement was already underway by the time SNCC organizers fanned

out into Mississippi communities, thus undermining my argument that outsiders are important in the emergence of protest. However, historians' recommendation that we view the civil rights movement as one of many local movements, with distinctive origins, aims, and trajectories, is apposite here. In Mississippi communities the development of protest elsewhere was met with stepped-up White repression. The major civil rights groups had written Mississippi off as too dangerous for extensive voter registration work, and the federal government showed little willingness to intervene on behalf of civil rights workers. One can legitimately ask whether political opportunities had indeed opened up. This raises a larger set of issues about the merits of a narrowly conceived political opportunity model.

⁵The following draws on Hayden 1995; interviews with Casey Hayden and Elaine DeLott Baker, Denver, 9–11 March 1995; and Emmie Adams, St. Johnsbury, Vermont, 8–10 July 1996, and on unpublished work in progress by Elaine DeLott Baker.

⁶I shall just note one other way in which the cultural challenge which issued from this free space was structured by wider cultural templates. Accounts of the women's liberation movement have not explored the fact that the women who penned the memo seen as a catalyst to its emergence were not subsequently among its leaders. To the contrary, the SNCC memo writers say now that they found the women's movement in some ways offensive, espousing just the kind of "angry identity politics" that they saw enveloping SNCC in the form of Black Power. For them, to join the women's movement was to abandon their identification with what they saw in the Black freedom movement as a more fundamental, more encompassing, and more inclusive cause. This suggests a good reason why protest movements may *not* incubate other challenges. Activists are likely to see the cause for which they are fighting as the most pressing and/or fundamental one. They may envision other forms of oppression being undermined by the dismantling of this one, or may see them as properly attacked by another group. White SNCC women's dismissal of the women's movement also points, however, to a broader cultural structuring of movement claimsmaking: a narrowing and ranking of identities that makes it difficult to confront more than one axis of oppression within the same movement.

⁷I want to distinguish my objection from those which accuse identity politics of a narcissistic concern with the self. To charges that contemporary movements have ill-advisedly abandoned the political sphere for projects of personal self-transformation, with the result "an introspective, fragmented antipolitics of lifestyle" (Kaufman 1990 pp. 77–78; see also hooks 1989, p. 106; Plotke 1990; Calhoun 1994; Gitlin 1994; criticisms of cultural feminism cited in Taylor and Rupp 1993), defenders of identity politics have challenged the narrow definition of power and politics implicit in such criticisms. Thus Andrew Ross chides the Left for "insist[ing] on a conception of 'politics'—real actions and events in the political sphere—that is always above and beyond what continues to be disparaged as the (merely) potentially political effects of cultural transformations" (1988 pp. xv–xvi; emphasis in the original; see also McClure 1992). Ross's point is that cultural challenge is also political. This does not answer my objection, however, which is to an abandonment of the possibility of radical challenge within the institutional political sphere.

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