



Social Movement Theory Today: Toward a Theory of Action?

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Abstract

Grand theories of social movements, relating them to History or Society, are being dismantled and reevaluated. In their place approaches are emerging that offer a cultural and emotional theory of action, allowing analysts to build from the micro-level to the macro-level in a more empirical way rather than deductively from the top down. Social movements are composed of individuals and their interactions. Rational-choice approaches recognize this, but their version of the calculating individual is too abstract to be realistic or helpful. Pragmatism, feminism, and related traditions are encouraging a rethinking of collective action.

I sometimes hear people complain that social movement theory has stagnated. When I press them, it turns out they are usually thinking about the grand theories linking movements to history and to society. For a generation, beginning in the 1960s, research into social movements, resistance, and collective action flourished under the inspiration of several such theories. Two of them, influenced by Marxism, were primarily macrosociological: an American version which emphasized the mobilization of resources and interactions with the state and a French version focused on the historical stage of a programmed or postindustrial society and its characteristic conflict. A third paradigm drew on very different sources, namely the assumptions of microeconomics. One name was especially associated with each of these ambitious approaches: Charles Tilly, Alain Touraine, and Mancur Olson. Each developed a fruitful research paradigm that inspired many others. (For reasons of space, and because relatively few scholars are self-consciously working in his paradigm (cf. McDonald 2006; Pleyers 2010), I do not discuss Touraine in this essay. See Jasper (1997, pp. 69–74) for more discussion of his work, which is subject to most of the criticisms I make of grand theories in this article.)

By the start of this millennium these paradigms had reached their limits, for a number of reasons including historical changes, the accumulation of anomalies, the partiality of the approaches' central metaphors, and simply the dulling of the excitement they had once generated. Tilly and Olson are now dead, and Touraine (1997, 2009) has turned from the study of social movements back to a more general social theory. The passing of these giants from the intellectual stage has left a silence, but hopefully one in which we audience members can continue a more modest conversation among ourselves. Having examined these paradigms at their peaks elsewhere (Jasper 1997), I want to concentrate more on their recent impact or lack of impact, in the hope of discerning some directions that theorists of social movements might now take. In many cases today's theorists are synthesizing the insights of the older schools while adding dimensions they overlooked. The overall trend, which I would like to embrace, is a bracketing of big structures in favor of a concern for the microfoundations of social and political action.

The collapse of the ambitious grand theories hardly means the end of social movement theorizing. To the contrary, modest theorizing, interpretive and action-oriented, which was once in the deep shadow of the grand theories, is now coming into its own. (Social movement theory must also contend with a subterranean suspicion about any kind of theory, which arose in the 1960s as a new generation dismissed the ‘armchair theorizing’ of their elders. One strand of this consisted of Tilly’s dense historical research, with its middle-range theoretical generalizations; the other was a symbolic-interactionist faith in grounded theory and the power of the field researcher to see things freshly (Lofland 1993)).

After structuralism

For thirty years, the dominant paradigm in American social movement theory and research was resource mobilization, which was later absorbed into political process theory. (I do not discuss McCarthy and Zald (1977) here because they self-consciously presented a partial theory, and scholars working in that tradition have continued to do this, in contrast to the inflation of political process theory into a grand scheme.) Grievances and attitudes of potential participants were downplayed in favor of organizational factors such as professional staffs and fundraising, and external circumstances such as elite allies and resources, state crises, a slackening in state repression, and other ‘windows of opportunity’ in the political environment. This was a powerful organizational and structural perspective that accounted well for movements by the repressed such as labor and civil rights – movements in pursuit of full inclusion and ‘citizenship rights.’ The *goals* of such movements were taken for granted; what they needed were the *means* to act. (Kitschelt (1986), Kriesi (1995), and others strengthened the concept of political opportunity by restricting it to structural characteristics of states–variables seen more clearly in the comparative light of Western Europe than in the United States).

Charles Tilly (1929–2008) was the main force behind this long trajectory, as much by the example of his tenacious research as through explicit theory. By boiling cultural meanings down to repertoires of collective action – familiar routines which reflected moral sensibilities, know-how, and available channels in a local setting – he could dispense with other forms of culture such as attitudes and goals, moral intuitions and principles, emotions, and anything that smacked of what he derided as ‘phenomenological individualism.’ His inattention to goals almost forced him to reduce struggle to the arenas in which it unfolded, as well as preventing him from addressing issues of failure and success (they could only be ‘outcomes’ detached from intention). Instead of an explicit theory of action, an implicit one seemed to imply that people pursued their material interests (Opp 2009).

The late 1990s saw the final crystallization of the political process paradigm (McAdam et al. 1996) but also mounting criticism. Theoretical critiques claimed that rational-choice assumptions were often surreptitiously buried in the models (Opp 2009), that concepts like resources and political opportunities were overextended (Gamson and Meyer 1996), that the idea of opportunities conflated short-term strategic openings and long-term structural horizons (Jasper 1997), and that a structural bias prevented full attention to cultural dynamics or any attention to emotions (Goodwin and Jasper 1999/2004). Much of the criticism suggested that the approach ignored actors’ choices, desires, and points of view: potential participants were taken for granted as already formed, just waiting for opportunities to act. There was no theory of action.

In 2001, in a sweeping critique of their own work, McAdam et al. (2001, p. 42) admitted four major defects in the process model: '(1) It focuses on static, rather than dynamic relationships. (2) It works best when centered on individual social movements, and less well for broader episodes of contention. (3) Its genesis in the relatively open politics of the American 'sixties' led to more emphasis on opportunities than on threats, more confidence in the expansion of organizational resources than on the organizational deficits that many challengers suffer. (4) It focused inordinately on the *origins* of contention rather than on its later phases.' (I disagree with (3), which might apply to mobilization theorists such as McCarthy and Zald, but not to the process perspective proper, which was developed with French labor history as its primary exemplar, thanks to Tilly's research. It actually works poorly with the movements of the 1960s, with the telling exception of the U.S. civil rights movement. Opportunities matter most to movements that have few of them, that are severely repressed: what I have called citizenship movements (Jasper 1997). They matter less to middle-class movements that can take many opportunities and basic rights for granted.)

'McTeam,' as they often called themselves, gestured toward an open-ended, strategic, and cultural perspective. They admitted that opportunities (and threats) must be recognized as such by insurgents, rather than being objective structural conditions. They acknowledged that cultural work goes on all the time and is not restricted to recruitment appeals (although they unfortunately lump all this under the rubric of 'framing,' rather than distinguishing the many mechanisms through which meanings and emotions are developed, promoted, and contested). Finally, they proposed to examine the actions of all strategic players rather than just movement activists, and to follow contention through to its conclusions rather than stopping after people are mobilized.

Yet *Dynamics of Contention* widely disappointed (Barker 2003; Koopmans 2003; Oliver 2003; Platt 2004; Taylor 2003). The main weakness was how the authors defined – or didn't define – mechanisms, despite dozens of examples. As Koopmans (2003) and others pointed out, the list included a grab-bag of disparate entities, many of which violate the spirit (and reduce the intellectual power) of social mechanisms. Although they had a few cognitive mechanisms, most were 'relational' – more complex entities than basic building blocks ought to be – and too structural to do justice to cultural meanings (Platt 2004). This is a structuralist interpretation of mechanisms, harking back to Merton's (1957, p. 52) use of the term as a kind of middle-range theory, a necessary component of functional analysis (Merton 1957).

In their rush to a more dynamic model, McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly did not take the time to describe the micro-level building blocks for such an effort. A more patient approach, but more promising in the long run, is to look at the little pieces of strategic interaction, many of them social-psychological and even psychological: moods, reflex emotions, affective commitments, decision-making heuristics, identity formation, memories, feelings of efficacy and control, leader dynamics, demonizations, escalations, and so on. This inattention is surprising, given that so many of the necessary components have already been described by cognitive psychologists, behavioral economists, discourse analysts, organizational sociologists, and others (including Oberschall 1973). Most of all, we need to insert individuals into our models, along with their decisions, dilemmas, defections, and so on. Meanings operate inside people's heads *and* in public embodiments.

McTeam embraced a 'relational' approach as a way to reject a methodological individualism that they defined as seeing reality as existing within the minds of individuals. (They ignore the common-sense possibility that individual minds are shaped through social interactions but then have a reality partly independent of those interactions, in

particular carrying past experiences along as memories, beliefs, feelings, and so on: Collins 2004.) But relationships differ from interactions. Relationships are already structured and ongoing and form the background for interactions. A more strategic approach would examine the interactions first and foremost and then perhaps work back to see what the players bring to those interactions, without assuming a relationship to start with. Thus McTeam (McAdam et al. 2001, p. 26) spoke of relational mechanisms which ‘alter connections among people, groups, and interpersonal networks.’ Why not speak of players as doing things to and with each other, rather than as restructuring relationships that then affect what they do? What are relationships outside of interactions or beliefs and feelings about others? What can the term do for us other than to cast a structural spell over our thinking?

McTeam largely ignored cultural meanings and the rich emotions of strategic action. They replaced framing with the broader but vaguer term ‘social construction,’ yet who is doing that construction work remained unclear. They spoke of ‘collective interpretation,’ but thinking is not precisely collective (there is no ‘collective mind’ to do it). They might have applied their ideas of claims making and relations to compound players’ internal dynamics, getting at the rhetorical processes by which claims (and players themselves) are constructed. Factions disagree about the interests of the collective, and which means are appropriate to pursue them. Individuals defect, partly or wholly, to pursue their own goals, alongside or instead of collective ones.

At the end of his life, Tilly (2003, 2008) tried to find a more extensive place for culture in his theory, but largely by making it an effect of structure (Tilly 2005). And his effort to add a dynamic dimension (Tilly 2008) got no further than an alternation between campaigns and political contexts, with each affecting the other in turn. Again, we sorely need a theory of action (Touraine 1984). (For more on the contributions and limitations of political opportunity theory, see Jasper forthcoming).

The wrong microfoundations

The year after Tilly published his book on the Vendée (Tilly 1964) that began to define the process perspective, Mancur Olson (1932–1998) published a small book called *The Logic of Collective Action* that applied microeconomic assumptions to collective action. Rational actors would participate in unions, social movements, and revolutions – any collective action – only if they personally gained something that they would not have if they did not participate. In the absence of these ‘selective incentives,’ individuals will choose instead to free ride, refusing to participate but enjoying any collective benefits attained. Only in small groups, where members can monitor each other and shame each other into contributing, will people participate.

Olson (1965, p. 61) famously recognized moral and emotional factors, only to exclude them from his model on the grounds that ‘it is not possible to get empirical proof of the motivation behind any person’s action.’ Of course, it is just as impossible to get proof that someone is motivated by self-interest. And neuroscientists are indeed mapping the parts of the brain activated in different altruistic or self-interested actions. Olson further muddied the waters by insisting, without evidence (but sounding much like Tilly), that ‘most organized pressure groups are explicitly working for gains for themselves, not gains for other groups.’ Finally, in the same notorious footnote, he admitted that affective groups – his examples are families and friendships – are probably best studied with other models than his. To the extent a protest group has affective ties, as most do, his model is inadequate.

In the generation since Olson wrote, there has been a wave of theory and research into the rationality of protestors, reflecting the expansion of rational-choice and game theory, especially in political science. Much of it has developed 'solutions' to Olson's free rider problem. Lichbach (1995) offers more than two dozen of them, which amount to nothing less than a how-to guide for activists.

In a new work, Opp (2009) presents the rational-choice paradigm as the only approach to social movements with an explicit and general theory of action. Thoroughly dissecting other traditions, he shows that they only make sense when a micro-level theory of action is added, which is usually already there implicitly. In most cases, he finds that the theory is some version of rational choice. He concludes this by defining rational choice very broadly (Opp 2009, pp. 2–3), as positing that 'preferences (i.e. goals or motives or desires) of individual actors are conditions for their behavior,' i.e. that action is goal-oriented; that 'behavior depends on the constraints or, equivalently, behavioral opportunities the individual is faced with'; and that 'individuals choose between the behavioral alternatives open to them by maximizing their utility.' He goes on to embrace a 'wide version' of this model that does not assume full information, explicit calculation, or correct perceptions. He adds that people may satisfice rather than maximize: they 'do what they think is best for them and not what objectively (i.e. from the viewpoint of a third omniscient person) yields the highest possible benefits.'

If people simply do what they think is best at the time, this opens the door to all sorts of interpretive and emotional dynamics that shape their perceptions and incentives. Opp does not tell us much about these, especially about emotions, probably because they do not seem rigorous enough to be formulated into the scientific-sounding propositions that rational-choice theorists favor (cf. Elster 1999). He is able to incorporate collective identity and cognitive processes into his model, in an effort to overcome the material/cultural dichotomy in Table 1. Opp's theory of action does not require people to be selfish or brilliant. But it does portray them as highly cognitive, aware of their goals, able to sort out and balance those goals. If emotions are ways of processing information, i.e. of thinking (and perhaps of unconscious or semi-conscious thinking!), Opp offers us insufficient ways to incorporate them. To the extent he expands rational-choice theory to incorporate many incentives beyond objective material interests (the extension that Olson warned against), he makes it unremarkable and uninformative. A completely general theory tells us little. Opp closes off paths of inquiry that might in the long run give us more fruitful images of action.

Table 1. Four approaches, 1965–2010

Level of focus	Implied primary image of human action	
	Materialist	Culturalist
Macrosocial	Mobilization or process: Tilly, Oberschall, McCarthy, Zald, Perrow, McAdam, Tarrow	Programmed society: Touraine, Melucci, Castells
Microsocial	Rational-choice or game theory: Olson, Hechter, Coleman, Lich- bach, Opp	Pragmatism, cultural-historical activity theory, Feminism queer theory, cultural-strategic or emotional approaches: Cefaï, Emirbayer, Jasper, Krinsky and Barker, Taylor

Toward meaning

Inevitably, the intellectual pendulum has swung away from the great structural and historical paradigms and back toward creativity and agency, culture and meaning, emotion and morality – the realm which Tilly rejected as phenomenology. Action as opposed to structure. Small things as opposed to big (Goldfarb 2006). Yet a pendulum does not come back to quite the same place with each swing. Instead of a return to the high phenomenology of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, the trend today is to place meaning and intention firmly in social contexts, in the institutional arenas and social networks and forms of interaction that the structuralists thought important. Theorists such as Touraine, Giddens, Bourdieu, and Habermas pursued such syntheses – with greater or less success – in the 1970s and 1980s, and a decade later, the ripple effects began to appear in the study of social movements.

Cultural theories were the first, often confused, effort to break with the organizational and structural paradigm. As early as 1986 Snow, Benford, and their collaborators offered framing processes as a way to see meanings in action, as orators tried to persuade their audiences of their diagnoses. Collective identities were the next big cultural concept (Melucci 1996), fruitfully theorized in the 1990s, especially by a generation of queer scholar-activists, whose fissiparous debates helped define the LGBTQ family of protest movements (e.g. Gamson 1995; Taylor and Whittier 1992). After the turn of the millennium narrative became the popular concept, often as a reassertion of the structured, constraining nature of meanings, based on language as the model for culture (Davis 2002; Polletta 2006). Although my own effort to synthesize cultural approaches (Jasper 1997, 2007) included emotions – I defined culture as cognition, emotion, and morality – most cultural works did not.

Pragmatism

Renewed appreciation of Pragmatist philosophy and the Chicago School of sociology has offered a theoretical heritage for parallel attempts to rethink action, meaning, and emotion. In a magisterial effort, Daniel Cefai (2007) unearthed the Chicago heritage of Park and his intellectual descendents, sifting through diverse literatures from rumors and fads to Quarantelli's pathbreaking work on natural disasters to investigations into the U.S. riots of the 1960s. He shows the power of Park's idea of publics, as opposed to the more easily dismissed crowds and masses. He also traces a Chicago tradition through researchers like Klapp and Gusfield, a constructionist point of view that was down but never fully out during the structural era (also Turner and Killian 1957). Rejecting the idea that crowds are irrational, Cefai shows that plenty of 'collective behavior' nonetheless occurs in and around social movements. He combines the Chicago legacy with the process and programmed-society approaches, and throws in the latter-day Chicagoite Erving Goffman. In Tilly and Touraine, he finds an inadequate understanding of meaning, a gap he fills with concepts aimed at grasping the practical creation of meaning: discourses, codes, moral boundaries, collective identities, emotions, rituals, and so on, including an intriguing plea for greater attention to law.

Cefai makes a methodological point as well, presenting ethnography as the surest way to understand the situations in which humans work and rework their understandings of the world around them. We need to build up beyond the face-to-face situations that preoccupied Goffman, but our starting point must be little things, the interactions where meaning and intention begin. Cefai's intellectual history generates a

number of useful mechanisms at the micro-level, as well as clearing the way for further elaboration of cultural, emotional, and meaningful concepts. (He is less useful on strategic decision making, which he tends to see as an aspect of the structural paradigm.)

In the United States, Emirbayer has followed a parallel path back to Pragmatism. Calling his version 'relational pragmatics,' he follows Dewey in attacking 'inter-actional' theories which assume that the interacting entities remain stable through the interactions. Instead, he insists, 'the units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance, and identity from the (changing) functional roles they play within that transaction.' Promisingly, he recasts into seemingly strategic language several prominent sociological concepts, such as inequality, which 'comes largely from the solutions that elite and nonelite actors improvise in the face of recurrent organizational problems....These solutions, which involve the implementation of invidious categorical distinctions, resemble 'moves' in a game, or perhaps even attempts to change the rules of the game' (Emirbayer 1997, pp. 287, 292). Emirbayer has applied this relational approach to agency and to the emotions of collective action, finding in network analysis a promising method for examining relations without reifying the entities that are related to each other (Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005; Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994; Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

Emirbayer's project is much like that of the later Tilly, whom Emirbayer cites approvingly, in that goals and meaning tend to disappear into the system of relationships. Emirbayer seems to be tormenting the corpse of *homo economicus*, with its unsocialized individuals who have full preferences before they engage others, a trope that many economists have themselves moved beyond. Sociologists since Durkheim, about whom Emirbayer has written, have reacted to economics with their own, oversocialized caricature. We must continue to search for a balance in which fully social individuals nonetheless can move from social setting to social setting, or even create settings, with their own projects in mind. They are embroiled in relations of many kinds, but something also precipitates out of those relations that we can call individual biography and which exerts its own force (Chodorow 1999). Individuals pursue a variety of goals through their interactions with others, not all of which are easily predicted from the setting itself, or from the relations they have with others.

Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)

If Pragmatism represents a rather American approach, appealing to liberals in the broadest senses of the word, then Marxists and post-Marxists have turned to Soviet-era activity theory to accomplish many of the same goals. Rooted especially in psychology of the 1920s and 1930s, among figures like Vygotsky (1978), Leontyev (1981), and Luria (1976), activity theory aims to balance individuals performing actions and the social contexts in which they perform them, with equal attention to each. There is also considerable awareness of the cultural symbols and other tools that enable this action, of people's purposes and goals, and the ways in which they learn to do things. The approach is extremely close to the humanistic Marx of the 1844 manuscripts. The literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, a fellow traveler, has inspired some work on social movements, such as Steinberg's (1999) investigation into weavers' discourses.

Krinsky and Barker (2009, p. 213; also Krinsky 2007) have explicitly applied activity theory (or CHAT) to protest: 'CHAT theory suggests looking at *strategy* as involving and

arising from a culturally suffused, emotionally laden process as future- and goal-oriented activity within and among systems of joint activity.’ They usefully recognize that each strategic choice constrains future choices, that as a result we can identify turning points in strategic interaction, that decision makers matter enormously, that action entails emotion and interpretation, and that we interact through utterances as the building blocks of dialogue. CHAT’s history imposes some potential limits, though. Its elaboration as a theory of learning in education theory leads it to some awkward parallels between individual and compound players, so that strategic interactions are described as ‘developmental.’ And its Marxist roots require ideas like ‘immanence’ and ‘totality’ which, unlike most of the theory’s entities, can only be inferred and not observed. (Immanence is an activity’s potential for self-transformation, something we can only surmise, I believe, if we also have a grand theory of history.)

Finally, due to its structural components, CHAT is a theory of activity (of groups), not of action (by individuals). ‘To make sense of human actions,’ say Krinsky and Barker (2009, p. 216), ‘we need to locate them within the larger activities of which they are a part.’ If human action is meaningless unless or until it is aligned with a collective activity, we lose some of our ability to see individual actions at odds with the group, or to see the ways in which actions can pursue individual and collective goals at the same time. We still need an improved theory of meaningful human action before we can have a better theory of group action.

Feminism and the queer turn

These efforts have retraced some of the landscape covered by feminist theories of social movements over the last two decades. Feminist scholars, often examining the women’s movement, have investigated cultural processes, emotions, and micro-level interactions. The internal debates and fissures of the women’s movement proved especially fruitful for understanding collective identities, for instance (Nicholson 1990; Taylor and Whittier 1992; Whittier 1995). The interactions between oppressor and oppressed are especially intimate in the case of gender, in contrast to the workplace interactions of class or the relative segregation of caste and race, and so gender must be based on cultural processes such as the internalization of dominant ideas. (Socialization into gender roles – including sexual attractions – also seems more thorough, at an earlier age, than that into class or race and ethnicity.) Much of the theorizing of cultural constructionism comes from feminists, from de Beauvoir to Butler, and feminism was one source for the initial rediscovery of emotions in social movements in the mid-1990s (Groves 1996; Kleinman 1996; Taylor 1996). In contrast to Emirbayer’s ‘manifesto,’ no one has pulled these feminist and queer pieces together into a coherent program or Big Theory that I can use here as representative of this tradition. The modesty of these scholars will help others borrow their mechanisms.

In the US, after the women’s movement fragmented over cleavages of class, race, and especially sexual preference, a lively cluster of LGBTQ movements emerged from the wreckage. Given a special spark by AIDS and ACT UP and related groups, a large number of queer scholars further thought through issues of collective identity (many collected in Seidman 1996; and Blasius 2001). Josh Gamson (1995), for instance, pointed to the key strategic dilemma of stigmatized groups: the same identity the movement is attacking is the basis for recruitment. It is a ‘necessary fiction.’ Eventually, this queer turn would help us understand the emotional dynamics of both the rise and the fall of social movements (Gould 2009).

Common themes

All these theoretical efforts are woven from common threads. Reflecting broad trends in social science, theorists of social movements are grappling with notions of *agency*. Individual choice guaranteed a place for agency in game and rational-choice theory, but reductionist images of human goals then constrained it. Agency is also a promising way to guarantee the dynamism that McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly claim to seek, but to which their residual structuralism blinded them.

Serious efforts to grapple with agency must remain close to agents' *lived experience*. Can it be an accident that the main practitioners of each of the big paradigms were men? The style that connects them is a rather gruff abstraction from lived reality, into a world of model, exemplar, or method. This is the scholarly equivalent of fantasy literature or computer games—an escape from social reality that I have elsewhere argued is characteristic of men more often than of women (Jasper 2000; chap. 8). (One reviewer for this journal intriguingly offered Francis Fox Piven (especially Piven and Cloward 1977) as an exception. I think this mischaracterizes her work, in which the strategic choices of protestors have always been more important than the structures they face. Her life has been devoted to encouraging the oppressed to rise, not to wait for a political opportunity to open up). Flacks (2004) and others (e.g. Bevington and Dixon 2005) have linked this concern for the actors' point of view with sympathy for their activism, but I think we can have this as a methodological precept whatever our sympathies (otherwise, how can we study groups we find offensive?).

Meaning must remain front and center, and the great wave of cultural research guarantees it will. Inattention to culture is one reason that rational-choice theory, even in its broad form, is no more than suggestive of the new path. Yet meanings must be the ones actually held by players, not the 'meaning' scholars attribute to History or Society. We have a variety of tools and metaphors for tracing meanings in politics: narrative, discourse, text, place, icon, characters, rhetoric, and so on (for an overview, see Jasper 2007). These are distinct *mechanisms* that carry meaning, and they should not be reified into separate, incompatible *theories*.

As part of this effort to incorporate a full range of meanings, we must add *emotions* and *moral visions* to the cognitive apparatus that all frameworks have tried to adopt. So far, the rediscovery of emotions has been an independent track imperfectly incorporated into other approaches (Goodwin et al. 2001; Gould 2009; Hoggett 2009). But emotions help us make sense of the world around us and formulate action in response to events – a form of thinking and evaluating more often than a source of irrationality (Nussbaum 2001). Summers-Effler (2010) links emotions to the temporal flow of action in protest groups. Through emotions we might also get at the role of bodies in human action, an important part of lived experience. 'This corporeal aspect of human agency,' as Turner (1992, p. 36) insists, 'is not in some sense beyond, alongside or outside the social.' Much of our 'thinking' operates automatically through our bodies rather than through our conscious awareness (Gould 2009).

Interactions among different players must also be central. To call this emphasis 'relational,' I argued, actually takes the choice and dynamism out of it, as 'relations,' such as differences in power, are based on a static, structural metaphor. Interactions are not fully determined by existing relations, as the point of many interactions is to challenge or reinforce prior relations. Clever strategy can often compensate for lack of resources (Ganz 2009). Too often, other strategic players have been reduced to 'the environment' for social movements, as in process theory. But to grasp their interactions we must

comprehend the perspectives, goals, claims and actions of all the players in an arena. (As I attempt to do in Jasper (1990), a work that Kriesi (2004, pp. 84–85) places in the political opportunity tradition).

Recent theories of ‘globalization’ have forced social movement theorists to rethink their obsession with the nation state and to recognize the importance of different arenas. Some mobilization efforts are cross-national (Bob 2005; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Pleyers 2010). Within a nation, too, there are many possible relationships between local, regional, and national protest groups. Global controversies have expanded our images of organizations and networks. At the level of theory, one of the gifts of globalization debates has been a recognition of just how much sociologists have reified ‘society’ with its corresponding ‘culture’ and ‘state.’ If there is such a thing as a state, it consists of a number of strategic players constantly jostling with one another across different boundaries (Jasper 1990). It is an arena more than a player. Once we begin to question states as unified entities, it is hard to stop similar ontological skepticism until we get down to individuals and their interactions (Freudians and postmodernists would not stop even at the level of individuals). We can no longer simply pit ‘movement’ against ‘state.’ Paradoxically, we cannot understand the special nature of the global without understanding the microfoundations that make up global, national, and local politics.

Conclusions

Some day, perhaps, the structural paradigms of a generation ago may come to be seen as a useful parenthesis, reminding us that the means of action matter as much as the goals, the arenas as much as the players. We must cling to this insight, keeping it in the background even as we return to the question that most scholars and practitioners care about: what do people want? Goals are as central to strategic approaches as are tactics, despite the common misconception that strategy is instrumental while goals reflect culture and emotions. As scholars return to issues of motivation and the ends of action, to people’s points of view, they can give better answers than the irrationalists of the distant past or the rationalists of the recent past.

Does the end of the ambitious paradigms mean we should give up on theory? Should we devote ourselves to the empirical tasks of normal science? Should we allow the field of social movements to fragment into subspecialties, so that specialists in the women’s movement, or in globalization, networks of recruitment, or emotions no longer need to carry on a conversation? Is there no reason for students of mobilization in Australia to learn from those who write about Nigeria? This fragmentation is well underway, alas, but one way to reverse it is through theoretical debate and synthesis. Struggle between several distinct paradigms is a fruitful situation for academic disciplines, as Collins (1998) shows. If we ignore theory in social movement research, we will make more conceptual mistakes. But the most productive way to do theory today may be to avoid big theories and concentrate on small ones. An explicit but realistic theory of action may help us get the little things right.

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Short Biography

James M. Jasper has written about social movements for more than twenty years, as part of the cultural turn in this field. In *The Art of Moral Protest*, he tried to incorporate emotions into the cultural dimensions of social movements. Since then he has continued to work on this topic, as well as trying to develop an approach to strategic engagement as a cultural-emotional alternative to game theory, in *Getting Your Way* and elsewhere. Other books include *Nuclear Politics*, *The Animal Rights Crusade*, *Restless Nation*, and the coedited volume *Passionate Politics*. Jasper currently teaches at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. For more information, go to <http://www.jamesmjasper.org>.

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