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## COLLECTIVE ACTION THEORY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS RESEARCH

Gerald Marwell and Pamela Oliver

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### ABSTRACT

Current social movement theory commonly refers to the collective action problem posed by Olson, but has provided little sustained attention to linking collective action theory with social movements research. Although sharing a central emphasis on instrumental or goal-oriented behavior, collective action and social movements cannot be directly equated because their levels of analysis are different. After reviewing the usual treatments of units of analysis in social movements research, we propose the concept of a *collective campaign*—time- and space-bounded sets of activities oriented toward the same goal—as a mediating concept useful for research. We then outline four prescriptions for social movements research: identify the relevant interest and its characteristics; define the ecological-temporal populations at risk of action and their characteristics; identify the set of actions likely to be involved; and identify the full range of possible outcomes. These prescriptions are discussed in some detail. Finally, we show how this approach might be applied in a specific case, resistance to school closings.

The past few years have seen a dramatic resurgence of sociological interest in social movements. In 1973, Quarantelli and Weller presented a paper at the American Sociological Association meeting lamenting the lack of a “critical

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mass" in the field of collective behavior and social movements. But their paper was itself only part of a gathering wave. Books and articles were already being written that would mobilize new personnel and resources for a new examination of social movements (for example, McCarthy and Zald, 1973; Oberschall, 1973; Wilson, 1973; Gerlach and Hine, 1970). At least in part, the impetus for this resurgence was sociologists' observations of and participation in the tumultuous 1960s. From the viewpoint of an "insider," the dominant theories of social movements, which emphasized their emotionality and crowd-like behavior, seemed foreign to personal experience. Instead, an older perspective, in which social movements are seen as purposive actions directed toward promoting or resisting social change, appeared to be a more attractive basis for the development of theory. New analysis took seriously the concerns of movement activists and focused on the problem of mobilizing action (McCarthy and Zald, 1977).

By itself, however, such a change in viewpoint could not account for the efflorescence of new analysis. New theoretical life came from the importation and development of theoretical ideas derived from micro-economics. In Olson's (1965) analysis of the problem of collective action many social scientists found a basis for reinterpreting social movements. Incorporation of this new perspective, however, has been unsystematic and mostly confined to generalities. Everyone assumes that collective action and social movements have a close relationship, but the nature of that relationship remains ill-defined.

This lack of systematic theoretical development is reflected in the nature of research into social movements. With certain notable exceptions, social movement researchers have continued to emphasize a case study approach. In this paper, we would like to consider the problems and prospects for moving towards accumulating quantitative information that could build on and supplement such qualitative research. The design of quantitative research depends heavily on the theoretical structure being tested for specification of the questions to be answered by the data, and for determination of appropriate units of observation and analysis. Thus, most of this paper will be concerned with examining the fit between collective action theory and the empirical nature of social movements, and with the heuristic implications of this relationship for future research.

### COLLECTIVE ACTION THEORY: THE PROBLEM AND THE APPROACH

Although other economists and political scientists have written about public goods and collective action, it is clear that Mancur Olson's treatise *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965) has had the major impact on social movement theorists (Turner, 1981:13). Olson's book itself is not especially concerned with social movements. It is an analysis of *collective action*, a much more general term that includes collusion among businesses, contributions to charitable organizations,

and volunteer fire departments. For Olson, any activity that provides a public good (one that must be provided to all group members if it provided to any) is a collective action. By his definition, an individual who acts alone to provide a public good is engaging in "collective action."

Most of Olson's impact seems to come from his strongly-worded three-page introduction, in which he asserts that "rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interests" (1965:2). The rationale for this assertion is explicated in the first part of the book. The rest surveys the history of labor unions, classes and the state, interest groups, and pressure groups, defending Olson's thesis that collective action is always accompanied by private (selective) incentives to reward contributors or to punish noncontributors. This material is only rarely cited or discussed (an exception being Fireman and Gamson, 1979).

Olson's argument is rooted in the long-standing economic proposition that economically rational individuals will not voluntarily contribute money to pay for public goods such as armies, legislatures, or sewage systems because of the "free rider problem." Free riders, people who do not contribute to provision of a good but consume it anyway, are a problem whenever the provision of a good to one member of a group entails its provision to all group members. Olson's contribution was to argue that *any* collective action, by any group, inherently raises the free rider problem, because collective action necessarily provides benefits that are shared by all. Under these conditions, free riding is "rational" economic behavior, and nobody should contribute. Thus, Olson's work posed the problem of mobilization: Just how is it that groups of people are able to act on their collective interests when every individual should rationally try to let the other group members do the work, and free ride on the results? This instrumental question coincided with the question social movement organizers ask: How can I get people to do something together about their problems? Thus, the theory fit well with political experiences.

The "resource mobilization perspective" has been built on this insight, and focuses on the problem of mobilization. One major line of work has been McCarthy and Zald's (1977) development of the analogy between social movements and social movement organizations on the one hand, and firms and industries on the other. The analogy suggests special attention to issues of resource attainment, product diversification, and the like. Another major line of work has been developed by Tilly and his colleagues and students, who devote attention to the resources and opportunities of both aggrieved populations and their opponents. Many scholars in the past decade have applied one or both of these approaches to the concrete question of the mobilization of some specific social movement.

Although Olson's work has thus had a general impact on social movement theory, *most* of his analysis is only marginally considered in that literature. Olson developed a particular mathematical argument, which he claimed proved the irrationality of collective action. This mathematical argument has been carefully

examined by a number of scholars in the "collective action" tradition, who have pointed out that it rests on highly restrictive assumptions which would not, in general, apply to many collective action situations (Oliver, 1980a; Frohlich and Oppenheimer, 1970; Frohlich, Hunt, Oppenheimer and Wagner, 1975; Chamberlin, 1974; Schofield, 1975; Bonacich, Shure, Kahan, and Meeker, 1976; Smith, 1976).

Most work in the collective action tradition has been abstract, decision-theoretic, and model-building in character, rather than substantive. It has not been at all concerned with social movements. Instead, for example, there is a large body of relevant experimental gaming research. This is because it has been argued that public goods "games" and prisoner's dilemmas are formally equivalent (Hardin, 1971; Dawes, 1970). Much of our own past work can be located in this formal and experimental tradition (Marwell, 1982; Marwell and Ames, 1979, 1980, 1981; Alfano and Marwell, 1980; Oliver, 1980a, 1980b, 1984). Perhaps the most ambitious contribution to this line of analysis is Hardin's recent book (1982). In it he pays particular attention to the role of convention in solving the problem of collective action. Nevertheless, even this important work by a political scientist stays primarily at the abstract decision-theory level, except for brief illustrations.

In summary, despite the near-universal recognition by this decade's scholars of social movements of the importance of collective action theory, little systematic work has been done to link collective action theory to social movements theory. Most social movements scholars simply cite Olson concerning the problematic nature of collective action. Only a few (Fireman and Gamson, 1979; Oberschall, 1979, 1980; Oliver, 1980a; Marwell, 1982) have developed formal models for particular collective action situations and have discussed their implications for certain problems of mobilization.

### SOCIAL MOVEMENT RESEARCH: WHAT'S BEING STUDIED?

Anyone who has read at all seriously in the area of social movements knows that the concept "social movement" is a theoretical nightmare. This is partly because different scholars disagree about which empirical phenomena ought legitimately to be encompassed by the definition, and partly because of genuine disagreements in theoretical approach. However, much of the confusion seems to arise from a lack of focussed attention to the problem. We have reviewed many published definitions of the concept (Blumer, 1939; Heberle, 1951; Vander Zanden, 1959; Gusfield, 1968; Wilkinson, 1971; Gerlach and Hine, 1970; Katz, 1971; Turner and Killian, 1972; Castells, 1977; Garner, 1977; Wilson, 1973; Useem, 1975; McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Perry and Pugh, 1978; Genevie, 1978). Oberschall's (1973) and Tilly's (1978) books on the theory of social movements

mention variations in others' definitions but do not provide explicit definitions of their own. The definitions we reviewed vary in the kind of "thing" a social movement is, and thus specify rather than answer the question: is a social movement a group of people, a set of beliefs, a set of activities, or something more ambiguous such as an "enterprise"? The definitions also vary as to whether illegitimacy or non-institutionalization is seen as essential, and in the organizational form that movements are seen to take.

The most important common theme that arises from these diverse and contradictory definitions is that social movements are about goals: they are about wanting or trying to promote or resist some kind of social change. Clearly, any theory of how and why people participate in social movements (as they are conceived by sociologists) must treat the elementary behavioral stuff of a social movement as essentially instrumental, that is, as oriented to the accomplishment of particular ends. This is not to deny that emotions and expressiveness are also important in social movement behavior. They obviously are, and we believe that a complete theory of social movement behavior should take account of the work that has been done on this topic in the collective behavior tradition. (See Lofland, 1981; Turner, 1981; Killian, 1981; and Oliver, 1982 for recent discussions of this issue.) Goal orientations are, however, clearly central to the concept. Further, social movements are about collective or common goals, which is why collective action theory seems relevant to social movements. Unfortunately, social movements theorists and collective action theorists have failed to distinguish adequately between the two concepts, and we think this has led to serious confusion.

The second common element we found in most discussions of social movements is the connotation of size, scope or significance. We think of the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the labor movement, or a nationalist movement. Few, if any, of us are comfortable calling a protest of dormitory residents who want fewer restrictions on their hours a social movement, but such a protest would easily fit several of the definitions of "social movement" we reviewed, and would not be explicitly excluded by many of the rest. If the issue were alleged discrimination against black or female residents, it is even more difficult to exclude the protest from the definitions. But do we really want to call a single protest, no matter what the issue, a social movement? If not, what should we call it? A collective action? Something else?

For collective action theorists, such as Olson (1965) and Hardin (1982), the dormitory protest is certainly a collective action. But so are the civil rights movement as a whole, contributions to charity, collusion among businessmen, volunteer fire departments, and an infinite array of other, vastly different, phenomena. Collective action is a highly abstract, general term which neither Olson nor Hardin attempt to formally define. Instead, they use the term in a non-specific way to include all activities oriented toward the provision of any "public good" to all group members, no matter what it is, or how many people were involved. Clearly, the concept of collective action is intrinsically too broad: it captures

actions oriented toward public goods that are not social change goals, and it lumps together actions of widely different scope.

Thus, we think it is a mistake to try to equate collective action and social movements. We believe that social movements are most usefully understood as complex *aggregates* of collective actions or events, aggregates which meet certain criteria of scope and size. This is in contrast to most definitions in the literature which tend to equate social movements with particular *kinds* of actions. We believe it is essential to recognize that real social movements are extraordinarily complex phenomena. They are aggregates of hundreds, thousands, even millions of discrete events: meetings, rallies, riots, petitions, conversations, and so forth. These activities are conducted by different kinds of people, for different reasons, using different organizational forms.

Our analysis of this conceptual problem has many elements in common with Gusfield's (1981) recent argument. He criticizes what he calls a "linear" conception of social movements, and argues for a more "fluid," amorphous picture. Gusfield notes that movements can have a variety of direct and indirect consequences other than the formally-stated "goals" of some organization, and that the accomplishment of movement goals may be due, at least in part, to factors other than movement activity. Similar arguments have been given by others, for example Tilly (1978), and Pickvance (1975) in his critique of Castells. We believe these points must be embraced by theories of collective action in social movements. In some ways our conception goes even farther, in that our image of the collective action itself is also fluid and complex. We part company with Gusfield, however, in our image of the central "stuff" of a social movement. Gusfield stresses the *ideas* of movements and the complex interrelations of those ideas with other social trends. By contrast, we return to the basic approach of Blumer (1939) and Turner and Killian (1972) and stress the *activities* in a movement as central. We treat ideas largely through their impact on what people *do*. We see the two approaches as somewhat complementary, as they address different features of the complex whole.

In our view, the key immediate problem for social movement research is to link a theory about single actions with a phenomenon that entails many actions. Social movements are made up of collective events, but the distance between these two phenomena is immense. Any particular collective event is an isolated snowflake, an insignificant ripple on the ocean of history. A social movement is more like the whole winter, or the whole ocean. Even if we can say quite a bit (and we believe we can) about why and how particular people engage in some single collective event, this will not necessarily tell us why a social movement came about. We do not need to repeat the criticisms that have (properly) been made of simplistic inferences from individual motives to structural convulsions, or *vice versa*. It is clear that the links between these levels of analysis are not simple or obvious. And yet forging the links, creating a theoretical account

of the link between social structure and micro-level behavior, is one of the critical questions facing the study of social movements.

## UNITS OF ANALYSIS IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS RESEARCH: THE LITERATURE

Speaking generally, there are two theoretical problems involved in linking collective action theory to empirical research on social movements. The first is to generate assumptions and models of collective action that are relevant to the specific kinds of activities most often found in social movements and describable through quantitative research procedures. The second is to specify the ways in which multitudes of collective actions are combined and affect each other in the formation of social movements. No one working in the substantive area of social movements has directly addressed the first problem, although a number of authors have developed collective action models for specific issues of interest to them (Fireman and Gamson, 1979; Oberschall, 1973, 1979, 1980).

Although they have not posed the issue the way we do, the work of many social movement researchers has implied strategies for the second problem—how one aggregates actions. Therefore, this section presents a review of these approaches as context for our own development of the issue.

### The Case Study Approach.

Some, perhaps most, scholars have tried to remain at the level of the social movement as a whole. Using either historical methods or participant observation, the researcher seeks to describe all the events and people involved in some time- and space-bound area. A diligent search is made for the connections among events, including those which may not be obvious to the casual observer. Because each movement is such a complex phenomenon, this approach has usually meant limiting the research to a single movement in a case study, what Tilly, Tilly and Tilly (1975) call the "clinical" method. The case is generally chosen on the basis of the dependent variable, that is, it is chosen because a high level of collective activity is known to have taken place, or to be taking place. Many case studies actually focus on specific organizations or sets of organizations rather than social movements as wholes. Case studies provide important insights into the relations between individual events and complex movements, but their *ad hoc* approach to defining units of analysis and relevant connections makes them less than desirable as a basis for theorizing.

### Surveys of Individuals.

A second approach, commonly chosen by scholars who wish to have some sort of comparative data base amenable to statistical analysis, has been the survey of individuals, either random members of the general population or participants in some particular organization or event. Such research makes moot the problem of defining a movement or the relation between movements and events. It can provide important ancillary data for understanding the context or scope of a specific movement, but scarcely provides a comparative basis for understanding the essential nature of the phenomenon.

### Organizations.

The most important recent sociological work on social movements has taken neither the case study nor the survey approach. Instead, these studies appear to be seeking a middle ground. Perhaps the most straightforward mid-range option is to study movement *organizations* as units of analysis, as exemplified by McCarthy and Zald's (1977) theoretical work and Gamson's (1975) empirical research. The definitional distinction between a social movement and a social movement organization is well known to social movement scholars, but this distinction is often blurred in practice, and there is a tendency to equate social movements with specific organizations. For example, Gamson claims his procedures could have produced one or more "challenging groups" that were *not* equated with organizations, since both events and organizations were listed in the original sampling frame. However, the protocols clearly required a *search* for some organization for each event identified in historical records, and in the end all units of analysis studied were organizations.

Organizations are important parts of many social movements, but many collective events in social movements take place outside organizations: riots, spontaneous protests, boycotts, wildcat strikes, demonstrations, and resistance to authority are some examples. Such events may be instigated by organizations, but they draw in participants who are not members of the organization and they have lives of their own which fall well outside organizational boundaries. The most telling example of this in recent American history is probably the riots by urban blacks in the 1960s: black organizational leaders sought to prevent the riots, and yet the riots clearly affected the progress of the total social movement and were largely motivated by the same broad objectives (Bryan, 1979). In sum, it is important to study social movement organizations, but a mistake confuse them with the totality of a social movement.

### The Ecological Approach.

The "middle-range" approach that we find more promising might be called "ecological," to use Snyder and Kelley's (1979) term. The most prominent scholar to employ this approach is Charles Tilly. Tilly's empirical research has been based on the notion of the collective event as the unit of observation. For a given place and a given period of time, such as 1830-1939 in France, Tilly and his colleagues systematically search for all incidents of collective violence and then describe each incident on a variety of characteristics. Their analysis makes such comparisons as the differences among the Departments of France in their yearly rates of violence, or the differences by year in the rates of violence for France as a whole. Thus, the frequencies of the violent events themselves are used as variables describing geographic areas. The units of analysis, however, are defined geographically and temporally. Essentially the same approach has been extensively employed to study riots by urban blacks in the U.S. in the 1960s, (Spilerman, 1970, 1976; McPhail, 1971; Morgan and Clark, 1973; Snyder, 1979; Stark, Raine, Burbeck, and Davidson, 1974; Wanderer, 1969).

The links between these violent events and the larger movements for social change are not clear in these research traditions. To make the link, we must assume that all actions of the same form (i.e. collective violence), undertaken in the same geographic area, within the same time frame, are oriented toward the same general social change goal. Further, comparisons across geographic or time units requires the additional assumption that all actions in a particular movement entail the same form of action in all units. These assumptions may be plausible for 19th century France, where most violence probably arose from the economic demands of the lower classes—although one might argue as to whether peasants and workers should be seen as being involved in the same movement. The assumptions would be manifestly implausible for New York City in the late 1960s. The Jewish Defense League, black ghetto residents, organized Black Power advocates, anti-Vietnam protestors, university students, anti-Castro Cubans, and many others, all engaged in collective protests in this ecological unit. We do not think there is any advantage to thinking of all these activities as part of some single general movement.

Historically specific reasons make the urban riots of the 1960s seem to be part of the same social movement: the Civil Rights and Black Power movements gave them a political and ideological meaning, which was shared by some but not all of the participants. Outside this very specific context, the method breaks down. It would be erroneous to group urban riots of other time periods in the U.S. as part of the same social movement, when they varied widely in such elementary factors as the "issue" (e.g. draft resistance, strikes), and the actors (e.g. students, workers).

Although we feel the ecological approach is on the right track, we think that it is insufficient as a basis for a theory of social movement behavior. We think

it fails because it does not take account of the interests or goals of the actors, and because it treats only one kind of action at a time.

### THE UNITS OF COLLECTIVE ACTION THEORY: ECOLOGICALLY SPECIFIED INTEREST GROUPS

At this point, let us turn to collective action theory and ask what approach to research on social movements *it* might suggest. Perhaps the first point to be extracted from the theory is that it is primarily a theory of interest groups: not of societies, not of individuals, not of organizations, and not of the kinds of face-to-face groups with which sociologists have been traditionally concerned. When Olson asks the question "when do groups provide public goods?" the "groups" to which he refers are interest groups—all those individuals who share an interest in the provision of the good or in the achievement of some specific goal. Similarly, a social movement theorist might ask "when does an interest group engage in activities designed to achieve its collective interest—activities that are numerous and substantial enough to be considered a social movement?" In other words, a social movement may be seen as some large-scale pattern of activity by the members of an interest group to achieve their interests.

This statement hardly resolves all problems. Any scholar who has tried to use the idea of interest groups for research knows how difficult the process can be. However, it is certainly necessary that we retain the centrality of interest groups for any analysis that hopes to learn from collective action theory. As we have noted previously, all violence in an area is not part of the same social movement if its orientation is not to the realization of the goals of the same interest group.

The theorist who most closely takes an interest group approach to social movements is Oberschall (1973, 1979, 1980). He is concerned with the activities of "negatively and positively privileged groups" in society. His analyses and examples tend to define membership in these groups in terms of common ecological residence combined with common economic or status position. These objective conditions are meant as predictors or proxies for interest. This is a common problem for researchers working with interest models. One must often assume that objective interest corresponds to subjective interest. It is the latter, of course, that is specified in collective action theory. Nevertheless, the assumption is often a good one, and there are circumstances under which direct information about its degree of error may be had. Further, under other conditions, direct information about subjective interest may be gathered.

Tilly's theoretical statement (1978) combines the interest approach and the ecological approach. He suggests that one approach is to define a group "at risk" of collective action by their objective interests or position in society and then see how much collective action they support across a particular time. In predicting their immediate behavior, however, he prefers subjective interests:

"rely . . . on people's own articulation of their interests as an explanation of their behavior in the short run" (1978:61).

### THE PROBLEM OF LEVELS OF PUBLIC GOODS

Any interest group formulation runs into potential conceptual problems with the tremendous variation in social movement goals. We generally identify social movements as those activities which appear to be aimed at fostering some general interest such as "civil rights," or passage of anti-abortion legislation. Thinking of interests as public goods, however, makes us realize the great variety of levels at which such goods might be specified. Thus, equal rights for women might be considered a public good for all women. Using this criterion, women filing class action suits, women demonstrating for the equal rights amendment, and women marching in a witches' parade are all seeking to provide the same, but very nebulous, good. In fact, many of these women might have quite different visions of what equality for women might mean. Some may think of it as equality of outcome, others as equality of opportunity. Some have a vision of a radical overthrow of patriarchy. Others want only the eradication of legal and other formal barriers. In what sense are these women all really seeking to provide the same public good?

At another level, some women might think that an equal rights amendment is vital to the achievement of equality, while others might think continued efforts in its behalf a distraction and barrier. If one is for a specific action and the other against, and they actually fight each other, are both trying to provide the same public good? Are they parts of the same movement?

Any given set of people confront an array of possible "goods" that are related to one another both horizontally and hierarchically. For example, the women of some community might consider acting to pass a local ERA and/or acting to build a rape crisis center. If all the women consider the crisis center to be a "good", they would all be a single interest group. But if only two-thirds of the women have any interest in an ERA, the other third are not a members of that interest group. These two goods are related "horizontally" in that they are both goals to be achieved at about the same level of process.

Compare them, however, with a march for an ERA. The provision of the march, itself, may also be seen as a public good. It is something that will be available to all women who feel it is a good idea, regardless of whether they contribute to organizing and staging the march or not. The march and the ERA are linked "hierarchically." One goal is a more proximate part of the process of achieving the other. And the ERA is itself only a lower-order good which is supposed to help bring about the more distant but ultimate good of equality. This notion of hierarchically related goals is similar to Gusfield's (1981) de-

scription of movements "nested" within widening circles of more and more diffuse movements.

### THE UNITS OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT RESEARCH: COLLECTIVE CAMPAIGNS

Social movements may be about interest groups with social change goals, but these goals are varied, diffuse, and multi-leveled. Collective action theory, on the other hand, is about specific, well-defined goals or goods. How, then, can we group collective events into meaningful units that are useful for research? Consider the construct we shall call the *collective campaign*, and which we define as an aggregate of collective events or activities that appear to be oriented toward some relatively specific goal or good, and that occur within some proximity in space and time. For any particular goal, the interest group is the set of *people* who desire it, while the collective campaign is the set of *activities* oriented toward it.

The notion of a collective campaign offers the possibility for an intermediate unit of analysis that seems to meet several important theoretical criteria. Explaining the strength and character of such time-, "good-", and area-bounded phenomena seems at once methodologically possible and close enough to the sociological meaning of social movements to provide a useful compromise. Social movements, in turn, may be seen as long-term aggregates of collective campaigns. Social movements are generally related to higher-level (i.e. more abstract) goals than are collective campaigns.

We do not mean to reify the collective campaign. It undoubtedly has at least a partially nominal character. Looking at the historical flow of events, the geographic distribution of events, and the specific goods that are the goals of these activities, the researcher must make somewhat arbitrary decisions as to the appropriate and workable boundaries to be used. Thus, the concept of collective campaign brings into focus what may be the key missing link between collective action theory and social movements—principles of aggregation.

One of the most important things to realize about the analysis of collective action is that much of the issue revolves around the emergence of certain types of activities, not just the rate of activity *in toto*. Thus, we might ask why so much of the collective political activities of blacks during the 1960s could be characterized as unorganized, spontaneous and violent, in sharp contrast with the events of previous years. Similarly, we might want to know why so much organizational activity seemed to blossom in the 1970s, or why collective campaigns in the 1970s were often marked by multiple organizations striving for the same goals. Such questions may be asked intelligently within a collective campaign framework. They also allow the researcher to focus on particular aspects of activity without having to know everything that is being done within a group.

We may continue to focus our study on riots, or violence, or organizations, or mass mailings. But the concept of a campaign should lead us to realize that we are merely asking when a given activity is more or less likely to characterize a campaign, and that we are not studying social movements, or even campaigns, as wholes.

### RESEARCHING COLLECTIVE CAMPAIGNS

In trying to understand collective campaigns, collective action theory directs our attention to certain factors which will be the focus of the research. In this section we will discuss these choices and some associated problems. As most clearly presented by Oberschall (1980), collective action theory uses as its basic elements the size of the population and the interest group, the value of the collective good to individuals, the perceived probability of success, and the costs of participation in collective action. Thus we suggest four basic steps a researcher must take in studying the collective campaign: (1) identify the relevant interest and its characteristics; (2) define the ecological-temporal populations at risk of action, and specify their characteristics; (3) identify the set of actions (or types of actions) likely to be involved in the collective campaign; and (4) identify the full range of possible outcomes of the various possible actions, and the perceptions held by actors of the probabilities associated with these outcomes.

#### Interests

To specify the relevant interest for defining the campaign is to specify the good or class of goods that will define the interest group or groups to be studied. Another way of saying this is to specify the social change goal at issue. For example, one might wish to study the factors associated with opposition to school closings, or in favor of gun control laws, or in favor of desegregated public accommodations. The level of specificity of the goal will vary with the researcher's purposes; for example, a study of the variety of forms of black political protest might specify the very general goal of improving the lives of black people. By contrast, Oberschall's (1980) recent study concerned the very specific goal of preventing the South African National tennis team from playing in Nashville.

Several questions can be asked about the defining interest. What has to change to implement it? In the arena of social movements, the answer most often is that other people outside the interest group must be influenced to change their behavior, but sometimes this is not the case. Does the interest involve more specific interests? For example, school closing protests are usually about keeping one specific school open, while desegregation campaigns seek to desegregate a large number of public facilities, and campaigns for equal rights for women seek a large number of legislative reforms. Outside of the interest group in question,

who gains and who loses from accomplishment of the goal in question? Are they the same people as those who control the accomplishment of the goal?

### Populations At Risk

For any given public good there is a specifiable ecological unit that appears to make the most sense as a basis for organizing collective action to achieve that goal. The members of that unit comprise the *population at risk* for performing the collective actions of interest.

It is important to stress two points about the population at risk. First, it should *not* be sampled on the dependent variable. That is, the population should not be defined in accord with a priori information regarding which groups have been protesting, or striking, or whatever. Secondly, it is not necessary that this population have the capacity to implement the desired goal alone, without the actions of other groups.

### *Distribution of Interests.*

Probably the most important characteristic of this population is the distribution of interest in the good. What is the level of what Tilly (1978) and others call "grievance"? Would only a few people profit from the good, or would many? Even this question should be divided. We should identify the size of two groups within the population at risk: the objective and subjective interest groups. Following McCarthy and Zald (1977) we may call the objective interest group (those who would objectively benefit from the goal) the *beneficiaries*, and the subjective interest group (those who actually desire the goal in question) the *adherents*.

The collective action theory based in micro-economics is concerned with preferences, with the subjective interest group: it treats the predicted behavior of people who value the good in question, not those who "ought" to value it. Discovering the distribution of subjective interests across a population at any given moment is, in principle, a straightforward survey problem.

Identifying the "true" objective interest group as something different from the subjective interest group is, in practice, much more difficult. It requires that the analyst—or the campaign organizer—make some, often questionable, assumptions about individual needs and people's lack of understanding of their own situations. As Fireman and Gamson (1979) point out, however, it is often precisely the task of organizers to make people realize what their interests are, and how they can be served by collective action. The objective interest group is identified through a structural analysis of people's social position and material conditions. In practice, the researcher often must make assumptions about the size of the interest group from demographic characteristics. For example, no information may be available on whether blacks in an area actually favor changes in Jim Crow laws or would benefit from desegregation, but the number of blacks

living in the area would be known. The number of blacks would usually be used as an indicator of the size of the interest group.

### *Distribution of Resources.*

A second important thing to know about the population at risk, and about the key subgroups, is what resources are available to whom, and how those resources are used. The term "resource" is used in the literature in a variety of ways. We believe the term "resource" should be restricted to things that can be consumed: principally time, money, and material goods. An individual who controls such a resource necessarily incurs a cost in contributing it to a collective event. Economists usually point out that all costs may be conceptualized as opportunity costs, i.e. the loss of alternative uses of the resource, and that these can vary tremendously between individuals depending on their other resources and possible activities. Although professional social movement organizations generally view money as their critical resource (McCarthy and Zald, 1973, 1977), most collective campaigns probably require time as the critical resource, and time is often the commodity of importance in community affairs. Money can buy time, but it is mostly used to buy large amounts of time from full-time activists, and is almost never used to buy small amounts of time from a large number of people.

In addition to consumable resources, group members have non-consumable characteristics that are often important in collective events. The most important of these are skills, knowledge, and influence. As discussed below, such characteristics are major factors in determining the form of collective event a collectivity can support. The reason we do not use the term "resources" to describe them is to emphasize that use of such characteristics does not directly involve a *cost* the way the use of consumable resources does. This is not to deny that using these characteristics may entail indirect costs (time, mental stress, displeasure), but analytic clarity requires the distinction because they factor into decisions about collective events in different ways from resources.

It is not enough to know the sheer quantity of resources and skills in the population: we must know how these are *distributed* across the population. Are the resources and skills concentrated or dispersed? Are they in the hands of the beneficiaries or adherents, or not? Are persons with complementary resources or skills in social contact with one another? These distributional factors are tremendously important in determining what kinds of activities (if any) members of the population will undertake.

It may be particularly useful to identify those resources that are controlled by groups rather than individuals, although in light of the organizational thrust of recent work in resource mobilization it must be stressed that it is just as wrong to ignore resources controlled by individuals as it is to ignore those controlled by groups. Groups may control money and material goods (but rarely time) that can only be expended in some collective decision and that cannot be alienated

to the private use of any individual. Such resources are often important in collective campaigns, since their opportunity costs for a collective event can only be other collective events and no individual bears any personal cost from their use. (The matter of individual contributions to such collectively-controlled funds is a different issue.) Analysis of group-controlled resources requires knowledge of the decision rules under which they are expended; these vary tremendously between organizations, all the way from individual control by a group leader to unanimous consent of the membership.

### *Social Organization.*

Contrary to the assumptions embedded in many collective action models, collective action, in general, is not undertaken by isolated automata: rather, it is undertaken by groups of people in social interaction with one another. Thus, any analysis of a collective campaign must take account of the social organization of the population at risk.

There are at least three important components of the social organization of a collectivity: social networks (Tilly's "netness"), common identity (Tilly's "catness"), and formal organizations.

Social networks are the linkages between people. The strong ties of friendship and love are usually distinguished from the weak ties of acquaintance (Duff and Liu, 1972; Granovetter, 1973). Social networks provide lines of communication which are necessary for the coordination of collective events. Both the density (number of ties) and inclusiveness (absence of cliques) are important factors in collective events. It is perhaps important to stress that these social networks are often the *informal* organization of the population. Particularly when residential populations are considered, there is often no need for a group to formally organize to have "social organization."

A common sense of identity or shared fate is often identified as an important social factor in a population's collective mobilization. This sense of identity is frequently fostered by group members' common experiences of oppression or common treatment by powerful persons. It is also affected by ideologies and symbols created and diffused across a population independently of changes in objective conditions. Recent decades have witnessed the development of ethnic consciousness among groups previously lacking it in many parts of the world.

People may have a sense of common identity or common category membership without being linked by personal networks, and vice versa. For example, many black Americans have a sense of common identity with all blacks, whether they know them or not. By contrast, residents of a suburban neighborhood may know each other, but lack any sense of shared identity or shared fate. A sense of common identity is important for solidarity, which is an important feature of many collective events.

Our use of the term "formal organization" simply distinguishes such orga-

nizations from the general concept of social organization; in collective events these organizations are often small, informally-organized voluntary associations, although obviously some are large and bureaucratic. In one sense they are part of the "netness" of the population. In addition, however, and as noted above, such organizations may control resources that cannot be employed for private purposes. Formal organizations are also often important for coordinating collective events. Meetings, mailing lists, and telephone trees are often major channels for communication. Organizational membership may also lead to the elaboration of social networks and collective identity.

### Actions

It is important not to forget the concrete nature of collective events. A group of 25 peasants goes *en masse* to a nearby manor house where three set fire to it with their torches while the others shout "burn it down" (in French, of course). A group of 3000 students at ABC University march down a street; about 500 of them carry signs with various anti-war slogans; about 15 throw bricks at the police. A group of 25 persons with histories of personal activism meet together and declare themselves an organization, appoint a treasurer to open a bank account in the group's name, divide labor and send out a mass mailing; in response, 2000 persons each mail back a membership form and \$5. To predict the form of collective campaigns, we must have suitable analytic categories to capture these concrete differences.

For each population we should identify their *repertoire* of possible activities, the set of actions which are perceived as possibilities. Tilly (1978, 1979) uses the term "repertoire" to emphasize that different historical and cultural groups have different "typical" activities when they protest. We use Tilly's term here to stress that only a relatively small number of culturally-available activities are usually considered. These activities involve different numbers and kinds of people using different amounts and types of resources and skills, entailing different amounts of coordination, and having differential consequences for the goals in which they are interested.

### *Resources and Consequences.*

Collective events require resources, but it is important to understand that resources are not just thrown at a problem to produce a beneficial outcome. Participants engage in certain *activities* which produce outcomes; in collective campaigns these outcomes are often mediated by other persons or institutions. That is, collective events rarely produce the collective goods of interest directly, but rather indirectly through persuading someone else to do something. Sometimes, the consequences of a collective event can be known in advance. Usually, however the consequences can only be estimated probabilistically. We may think

of a movement *technology* as a set of information about cause-effect relations, i.e. as knowledge about the probabilities of success of various courses of action. To speak of a technology is to recognize that it can improve over time and experience. Movement technologies are more complex than industrial technologies in that they generally act on other people who can and do change their responses over time. However, this is an extreme case of the technological problems in "human processing" industries, such as teaching and social work, and does not alter the basic conception that people have information about the likely consequences of their actions. Thus, we may think of each collective event as involving a combination of resources and technological knowledge. Obviously, interest groups can undertake only those collective events for which they have the needed resources and technologies.

#### *Size and Organization.*

Collective events vary in the number of people involved, or their size. They also vary in the quantities of resources consumed. It is important to recognize that for some kinds of actions the sheer number of participants affects the outcome, while for others, resources have the greater impact: an effective protest march requires people, while an effective advertising campaign requires money.

Activities also require different levels of coordination, ranging from the very loose to the extremely complex. The *cost* of organization varies directly with the number of people coordinated, the level of coordination required, and the number of new communication links which need to be created. Most collective events appear to have one of three general forms of organization: cadre-only, mass-only, and mixed. A cadre action is one in which the actions of the participants are specialized and interdependent and, thus, require a high level of sequential and reciprocal coordination (Thompson, 1967). A mass action is one which entails only loose coordination: actors engage in roughly parallel and simple actions in the same time-space locus. People do something that requires little skill or training (march, cease work, riot) and only enough communication to let them know when and where to do it. A mixed action is one in which a cadre engages in highly coordinated activities to organize some event in which others can participate in a simple and loosely-coordinated way; most marches, rallies, demonstrations, and petition campaigns have this form. The key feature of a mixed action is bimodal levels of involvement distinguishing the organizing cadre from the mass of participants. As the language implies, cadres are generally smaller than masses, but the cadre in one event might be larger than the mass in another. Highly-coordinated groups tend to be smaller than less-coordinated ones, but the terms refer to level of coordination, not to size.

#### *Satisficing.*

One of the more important insights in micro-economics in the past several decades concerns the process by which individuals actually choose the behavior

they enact. The simplest assumption, and the one which dominates current theory regarding collective action, is the classic position that individuals optimize. Actors are seen as considering all logically possible actions and then choosing the one that will return the maximum positive difference between benefit and cost. Turner (1981) has criticized the use of this assumption by sociologists studying social movements, arguing instead for Simon's well-known "satisficing" criteria in decision making. Simon's models appear better than optimizing models at predicting the results of research by experimental social psychologists, economists and game theorists. Simon suggests that people actually approach almost infinitely complex decisions by making a variety of simplifying assumptions. The most important of these for our purposes is that the morass of theoretically feasible alternatives is never considered. Instead, people choose among a very small number of obvious possibilities until they find a satisfactory solution; less obvious options are considered (if at all) only when none of the obvious solutions yields satisfactory results. It should be said that, in practice, virtually all theoretical and empirical work on human choice has actually begun with a well-defined (and relatively small) set of options from which the individual must choose, despite the nominal assumption of optimization. The satisficing model corresponds particularly well with the notion of repertoires of collective action.

Of course, most people, most of the time, perceive no option at all except their current behavior, which is usually doing nothing. This is especially the case with collective campaigns. Thus, most people do not perceive themselves as making decisions at all. The perception that they have some choice is generally provoked either by some substantial change in the relevant environment, or by some direct request for them to take some specific action—a request that must be accepted or refused. Under such circumstances, their range of perceived options tends to be in fact limited by the agenda set by others. Only a few individuals (often known as activists) actually make choices about their collective actions from a wide array of possibilities.

#### *Interdependence.*

We must stress that the usual assumption of economists that actors make independent decisions—that they make their own decisions without knowing how others have chosen—is manifestly inappropriate for understanding the vast majority of activities making up collective campaigns and social movements. Monetary contributions in response to mailed solicitations are the only form of action common in social movements that meets the independence assumption. In general, collective events are undertaken by people in interaction who are aware of others' choices, and whose preferred actions depend upon others' actions.

It is perhaps also necessary to stress that making assumptions of interdependence complicates formal models of collective campaigns, but in no way inval-

idates the basic decision-theoretic approach. A number of social scientists have employed interdependence assumptions in analyzing various problems of collective action (Oberschall, 1973, 1979, 1980; Oliver, 1980a; Granovetter, 1978, 1980; Frohlich, Hunt, Oppenheimer and Wagner, 1975; Frohlich and Oppenheimer, 1970).

A recent example of such work is Oberschall's (1980) analysis of the conditions under which a protest will grow over time. He makes the specific interdependence assumptions that costs decline and probabilities of success increase with the number of participants in a campaign. These, coupled with an assumption of normally-distributed values for the good (interests), allow him to derive a prediction that protests will grow over time until they reach the point of diminishing marginal returns. He makes a somewhat different analysis of the national diffusion of protests, arguing that the success of one such protest shifts the perceptions of probabilities of success of actors in different locales. He applies these theoretical ideas to a case study of escalating protests against the South African National tennis team playing a Davis Cup match in Nashville. Granovetter's (1978, 1980) treatment of threshold models is another example of a treatment of collective action employing interdependence assumptions.

### Outcomes

The possible outcomes of collective action for individuals may be categorized by a two-by-two typology: "good" versus "bad" outcomes are one dimension, while whether the outcomes derive from the collective action itself or are mediated through accomplishment of the collective good, is the second.

Considering outcomes mediated by accomplishing the collective good, most treatments (Olson, 1965; Hardin, 1982) assume that public goods are in fact "goods," i.e. that they are things that members of the interest group positively value. Since we assume that collective action is instrumental, we agree that this generally should be the case. However, we see this positive valence as only probable, even in the view of the participants. Union members may undertake a strike to get a better contract, but they may also see some real probability that the activity will lead to a public "bad," such as the closing of the plant. In the latter case, even the "scabs," who did not go on strike, would lose. The mixed and complicated nature of possible outcomes is characteristic of collective campaigns for social change. An analyst should always consider the collective risks a group faces as well as its potential collective benefits.

When outcomes of the action itself are considered, it is usual to assume that collective campaign activity is costly to individuals in time, energy and other resources. Again, we agree with this generalization. However, benefits may also derive from the action itself. Some see a strike as a positive personal experience in excitement, sociability, expressive hostility, and perhaps even in some much-wanted time off to spend with the children to go fishing. Persons whose daily

lives are boring and unsatisfying often derive great intrinsic pleasure from their participation in collective action; community organizers' knowledge of this is often an important element in collective mobilization.

In addition to intrinsic benefits and costs, collective action often entails private or selective incentives, benefits and costs imposed by others on individuals according to whether or not they participate. Solidary incentives, the social approval and disapproval of friends and family, are one of the major kinds of selective incentives, which is one reason why social networks and group identity are such important factors in a group's support for a collective event. Outsiders may also impose benefits and costs on participants. In many contexts, the most important of these are death, injury, or imprisonment: any non-negligible threat of such response substantially alters the context for participation decisions.

In addition to these individual outcomes, it is important for the analyst to search for collective consequences other than the goal in question. Actions may increase the social organization of a population, or bring them new resources, or alter their social relations with other groups. Even though they are not part of the decisions people make when deciding whether to engage in some action, they affect the possibilities for subsequent action. Since collective campaigns involve *sequences* of actions, these side-effects are often of critical importance.

### CONCLUSIONS

We believe that our conception of collective campaigns, collective action, and social movements clarifies previously unclear relations among these concepts in a way that aids empirical research. These arguments may be intuitively summarized by applying them to a particular example: protests against school closings.

Because of declining school-age populations, many school districts are closing schools; this is frequently (but not always) seen as undesirable by residents in the service area of the closing school. Proposed school closings are met with a great variety of collective responses. In some neighborhoods, no action at all takes place. In others, individuals or small groups seek to organize opposition to the proposal, but no substantial or sustained protest takes place. In still other neighborhoods, concerned individuals engage in behind-the-scenes lobbying while making no effort to mobilize mass protest. And, finally, some neighborhoods exhibit widespread sustained protest which, sometimes, is transformed into a longterm political force. The task of the researcher is to identify the sources of such different responses and to use this information to develop the theory of social movements.

In line with our theoretical exposition, the researcher would first seek to identify the *interests* at stake. Clearly, the central interest defining a collective campaign in this area is keeping a particular school open. In different neighborhoods, however, this central defining interest is linked to different ancillary

issues. For example, people in most neighborhoods may resist the closing of their school without developing alternate proposals. Where alternates are developed, though, two very different possibilities exist: the adherents can advocate that some *other* school be closed, a position which leads to inter-neighborhood conflict, or they can advocate that no schools anywhere be closed, a position which may lead to inter-neighborhood alliances of "pro-school" forces, possibly in opposition to those who would rather pay lower taxes. Opposition to closing a school may also be related to more general interests such as protecting property values, preventing racial or ethnic integration, or protecting the collective identity of a locale.

It should be apparent that the ancillary issues become quite relevant in specifying the *population at risk*. In general, the "neighborhood" (i.e. the service area of the affected school) is the most reasonable boundary for the population at risk. Parents of school-aged children would normally be seen as the "objective" interest group or beneficiaries, while those who, in fact, oppose closing the school (whether parents or not) would be the "subjective" interest group or adherents. If preventing *all* school closings is an important ancillary issue, it might be meaningful to consider the entire district as bounding the population, perhaps contrasting parents with non-parents. If maintenance of segregation is an issue, on the other hand, boundaries might be drawn around ethnic or social areas.

Within neighborhoods, we need to examine residents' *resources* and *social organization*: the key independent variables from collective action theory. Further, we need to examine the distribution of these factors across the interest groups within the population. In general, we expect greater resistance in neighborhoods in which interest group members have more time or money. In particular, middle-class neighborhoods should show greater resistance than poorer neighborhoods, and neighborhoods with lower rates of female employment outside the home should show greater resistance than those with higher rates, *ceteris paribus*. This assumes that the children of these more "resourceful" actors are involved. If, as in more and more inner-city neighborhoods, the children of the middle class attend private schools and only less prosperous children attend public schools, we would expect resistance to be muted because the resources are not in the hands of the interest group.

In a similar vein, we would expect more resistance in neighborhoods with active community organizations, particularly political organizations. Many neighborhoods have active neighborhood associations, chapters of ethnic groups (i.e. the NAACP), or precinct organizations. Others are dominated by one church or a few churches, which provide a basis for organization. Because they have already absorbed many "organization costs," such organizations make resistance less costly and therefore more likely. In contrast, neighborhoods without such organizational bases would be less likely to mobilize.

To identify the *repertoire of actions*, our best source is the recent history of

the community in which the neighborhood is embedded. We expect that activities that have recently been used by other similar groups are most prominent, particularly if they have been successful. Self-conscious organizers may have repertoires developed from their training, experience, or communication with networks of organizers in other locales. Recent publicity about an event in another locale may add it to a group's repertoire. It is also important to recognize that there are often important sub-cultural differences in repertoires: student riots, speeches linking the issue to racism, research reports, mass demonstrations, and telephone calls to congressmen or newspaper reporters are all activities which are quite likely in some neighborhoods and unthinkable in others.

Local conditions structure the *technology* available to a group. Machine politics might make electoral organization meaningless. Heavy police control over all demonstrations might make such activity too costly. The custom of holding hearings provides an obvious target for action; elementary factors as the location of such a hearing and the size of the room affect the possibilities of action. The stance of the local media affect technology, as the efficacy of many actions depends on whether they receive publicity. Elected officials are likely to be more responsive to pressure the larger the affected neighborhood is as a proportion of the base from which the officials are elected.

Besides the question of whether the school stays open or not, the researcher should look for other possible *outcomes*. Many of these are selective incentives for participation. The possibility of working with a protest group might provide solidary incentives, especially for two groups, those with close ties to their neighbors, and those who seek closer ties such as lonely new residents. The protest might offer the chance to launch a political campaign or career. It might offer the possibility of providing something interesting to do or of developing a sense of personal competence. Existing groups might see the potential campaign as a means for furthering their organizational goals.

Additional collective outcomes (both good and bad) should also be considered. Keeping schools open might lead to higher taxes or to reductions in certain programs in the schools. The campaign might improve the morale of teachers, by making them feel that someone appreciates their work. The collective identity of the neighborhood might be raised by the campaign for participant and non-participant alike. Of course, if there is dissensus about keeping the school open, neighborhood disharmony is also a possible collective outcome. Apart from whether the school is closed or not, the campaign itself may help or hurt the political "clout" of the neighborhood in future controversies, either because the campaign affects others' perceptions of the political strength of the neighborhood or because the outcome on this issue is seen to require some subsequent exchange to achieve balance.

We have developed this one example to demonstrate that the approach we have outlined in this paper provides a coherent logic for conceptualizing research about a specific problem. We believe that this approach would be equally fruitful

for many other substantive research problems, for it recognizes the variety and complexity of collective events in social movements while simultaneously providing a coherent approach to analyzing them.

We have emphasized the comparison of distributions of collective events of various types across units of analysis because we believe this kind of research is necessarily most common. The collective campaign can be thought of in static terms, as the distribution of events in some defined time-space locus. But the fact that collective campaigns are made up of events calls attention to another important arena for research: the ways in which events affect other events. Throughout this paper we have alluded to such effects in passing, principally by noting that successful events change observers' perceptions of their probability of success should they engage in a similar activity; this phenomenon is the logic behind Oberschall's (1980) diachronic analysis of the growth in participation in a single kind of event. There are other ways in which events affect each other over time to build into campaigns, and we believe that analyzing such effects is one important direction for future theory and research. We believe that our analysis of collective campaigns can provide a basis for freeing this research tradition from its dependence on one-shot case studies.

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