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Francesca Polletta

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# Culture and Movements

By  
FRANCESCA POLLETTA

Thirty years ago, social movement scholars treated culture as just so much noise in structuralist theories of mobilization. Since then, they have become highly attuned to cultural processes, probing how people come to interpret their grievances as political, how culture sets the terms of strategic action, and when movements succeed in changing the rules of the institutional game. The result has been better theories of movements' emergence and impacts but also important insights into culture. In particular, movement analyses have shed light on two questions that have long exercised sociologists of culture. How does culture constrain practical action? Under what conditions does culture serve not to reproduce the status quo but to challenge it? After a brief review of movement scholars' evolving perspectives on culture, the article focuses on movement studies that have contributed to theorizing broader dynamics of cultural innovation and constraint.

*Keywords:* culture; social movements; institutions; politics

To make a cultural argument in the sociology of social movements is to assert that culture constitutes the interests on behalf of which people mobilize. It is to assert that activists' choice of tactics and targets is shaped—indeed, limited—by prevailing cultural beliefs. And it is to assert that movements achieve significant effects as much by altering the cultural rules of the game, both within politics and outside it, as by winning formal policy reform. Increasingly, to make a cultural argument is to refuse to treat culture as a residual category that is invoked to

*Francesca Polletta is an associate professor of sociology at the University of California, Irvine, and works in the areas of social movements, culture, law, and democratic participation. She is the author of It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics (University of Chicago Press 2006) and Freedom Is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements (University of Chicago Press 2002) and is the coeditor, with Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper, of Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements (University of Chicago Press 2001).*

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explain what structure does not explain in accounting for movements' emergence, what instrumental rationality does not explain in accounting for movements' tactical choices, and what policy reform does not explain in accounting for movements' impact.

The challenge, of course, has been to award culture a substantial role without treating it as free-floating, independent of the organizational agendas and self-interested political actors through which it actually has force; without treating activists as strategic dopes or ideological dupes; and without abandoning the effort to operationalize success in terms of measurable impacts. Where scholars have responded to those challenges, the result has been better theories of mobilization. But the result has also been new insights for sociologists of culture. Indeed, as much as the sociology of social movements has benefited from advances in the study of culture, the sociology of culture can draw fruitful insights from the study of social movements.

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This is true with respect to at least two questions that have long exercised sociologists of culture. If culture much of the time reproduces existing structures, it is also used occasionally in ways that challenge and transform those structures. When does that happen? Cultural sociologists have sometimes treated social movements as evidence of the "unsettled times" in which established cultural frameworks are contested and transformed (Swidler 1995). Yet, in the absence of attention to why and when movements emerge, one can easily end up with a pretty thin model of culture, in which purely structural economic and political dislocations generate movements that only then generate cultural challenge. Movement scholarship has been valuable in this regard in probing the interplay of culture and structure in the processes by which people develop stakes in social transformation.

The second vexing problem for sociologists of culture is that people use culture practically and creatively and yet they do so, most of the time, in ways that reproduce the status quo. How does culture constrain practical action? And how do we answer that question without portraying people as stupid or suffering from false consciousness—either way, somehow blind to better courses of action that we analysts can see? Movements are interesting in this respect because activists, for the most part, seek to use culture strategically. By paying attention to the

trade-offs they face both in conforming to cultural conventions and in challenging them, as well as to the calculi by which they rule options in and out of consideration, we can get at how culture sets the terms of strategic action, without simply locating those processes in people's heads.

In the following, I focus on movement studies that have offered interesting answers to these questions. First, though, I offer a brief history of the treatment of culture in movements.

## Forty Years of Culture in Movements

In the *collective behavior* models that dominated the study of movements into the 1970s, culture was important. System strain was a precondition for protest but without the emergence of a "generalized belief" in the transformative power of protest, people were unlikely to mobilize (e.g., Smelser 1962). However, collective behavior models were dogged by the suggestion that protesters were irrational: atomized individuals who were swept up by charismatic leaders into forms of action that were clearly inferior to mainstream political ones (and in that vein, Smelser [1962, 8] described the "generalized beliefs" that motivated collective action as "akin to magical beliefs"). That suggestion, explicit in early collective behavior work, was increasingly muted as movement scholars turned from studying communists and fascists to studying civil rights activists and anti-Vietnam war protesters. Nevertheless, all versions of the model and, along with it, a premium on the beliefs motivating protest, were vehemently rejected by a new generation of movement scholars in the late 1970s who insisted on the political rationality of protest.

In two seminal pieces, Jenkins and Perrow (1977) and McCarthy and Zald (1977) argued that discontent on the part of disempowered groups could be assumed to be constant. The relevant questions in accounting for movements' emergence, then, had not to do with the sources or strength of people's discontent but with the conditions in which they had the resources to act effectively on that discontent. *Resource mobilization* scholars turned from looking for indicators of system strain to discerning the kinds and levels of external resources that people excluded from the system of political bargaining needed to engage in effective action. They turned from a model of social atomism to one of industrial economy, and they turned from tracing patterns in protesters' beliefs to tracing patterns in movement organizations' founding and dissolution.

Alongside this self-consciously structuralist agenda, one vein of research and theorizing continued to emphasize the importance of how people interpreted their discontent. William Gamson and David Snow and their colleagues (Gamson 1988; Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1992) drew on Goffman's notion of framing to explore how movement actors cast problems and solutions in ways that mobilized action. Success was not just a matter of a forceful message, of course, and some messages were more difficult to frame effectively than others. Drawing on a variety of empirical cases, *framing* theorists began to explore what activists

were up against in their efforts to develop resonant frames and why some frames succeeded while others fell on deaf ears.

The framing perspective was integrated into a third major model of social movements in the 1980s. Sharing with resource mobilization theorists a view of protesters as rational actors, *political process* theorists focused more closely than their predecessors on the specifically political shifts that rendered the state vulnerable to protest. At the same time, they insisted that politically marginalized groups were not as powerless as resource mobilization theorists thought them. Oppressed groups often had indigenous organizations and networks capable of supplying leadership and, crucially, the solidary incentives that motivated people to participate rather than free-ride. For example, in the work that gave name to the political process perspective, Doug McAdam (1982) emphasized the roles of the Southern black church and black colleges in making participation in the civil rights movement normative for their members.

Along with political opportunities and mobilizing structures, a third key condition for movement emergence was specifically cultural. McAdam (1982, 34) called it “cognitive liberation”: the process by which people came to see oppression as “both unjust and subject to change.” In subsequent iterations of the model, cognitive liberation was replaced by the concept of collective action framing. Resonant frames enabled groups to recognize the injustice of their situation, to see political shifts as political opportunities, and to begin to envision alternatives. Absent those perceptions, political process scholars now maintained, political opportunities would come to naught.

Political process theorists also began to incorporate culture into their analyses of other movement dynamics. Activists were principled actors as well as instrumental ones, scholars pointed out, and as they chose strategies and tactics, their instrumental calculations were always tempered by their cultural commitments—to nonviolence, say, or to radical democracy. When it came to movement outcomes, political process theorists departed from resource mobilization theorists in recognizing that activists often sought to change cultural practices as well as institutional policies and that, whatever activists’ actual purposes, the outcomes of movements were often most visible in the arenas of culture and everyday life rather than only in policy change. (For a political process approach to culture, see McAdam [1994] and the essays in Morris and Mueller [1992]; and for an overview and assessment, see Armstrong and Bernstein [2008].)

Yet, for all their attention to culture, political process theorists still tended to conceptualize it in a limited way. The interests on behalf of which people mobilized were assumed to be objective, long-standing, and given by their structural position. Culture was simply the subjective lens through which people discovered their interests. What that left out entirely, of course, was how those interests were constituted in the first place. When and why have certain areas of social life—race relations, say, or nuclear policy, or university curricula—suddenly become the grounds for mobilization and conflict? How have diverse and dispersed individuals come to see themselves as a collective actor? These questions were not

asked. Conceptualizing culture in opposition to strategy also ignored important questions. Framing theorists treated culture as enacted in activists' normative commitments, acting as a brake on their pursuit of instrumental imperatives, thus missing the fact that what counted as instrumental was itself cultural. Grasping how the bounds of the strategic were defined would have shed valuable light on movements' trajectories. Finally, an implicit opposition between culture and politics limited movements' political impacts to legislative reform and the composition of governing bodies. Cultural impacts were treated as occurring outside the political sphere and as secondary to those that occurred within it.

This view of culture dominated in the field. Yet, some scholars were already pushing past the oppositions of culture/structure, culture/strategy, and culture/politics on which it rested. Several developments were probably responsible. Many American sociologists were skeptical of claims made by *new social movement* theorists in the 1980s that Western European campaigns around nuclear energy, local autonomy, and homosexuality represented a dramatically new form of mobilization. They pointed out rightly that the archetypal "old" social movements, namely, labor movements, had always challenged dominant cultural imagery at the same time as they sought to redistribute economic and political power. By the same token, many of the so-called new social movements relied on "old" strategies such as litigation and political lobbying. Still, new social movement theorists' arguments did encourage American sociologists to highlight identity-construction processes in older movements—if only to rebut the claimed novelty of their successors—as well as to probe more generally the emergence of interests in contention. (Key new social movement theorists include Touraine [1981] and Melucci [1989]; for an overview, see Young [2007].)

Another development favoring a more culturalist approach was the effort to theorize movements that were not targeted primarily to the state. Sociologists had long studied movements in science, religion, education, and so on. But political process accounts of movements still privileged the state as the target of collective action, the place to look in accounting for movements' timing, and the site of movements' primary effects. Even when they acknowledged that some movements had very little to do with the state, political process theorists maintained that one could identify analogues to the political opportunities that made it possible for marginalized challengers to confront authorities in a bid for power (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). Some scholars now argued, however, that none of those terms could be applied to non-state-oriented movements: challengers were often well endowed, the line between them and authorities was sometimes hard to draw, there was nothing comparable to the political cleavages and reduced levels of state repressive capacity that constituted political opportunities, and challengers often sought not power but cultural change (Snow 2004; Binder 2002). This led to interest both in the cultural developments that served as triggers to protest and the cultural changes that were movements' aims and impacts.

Finally, movement scholars have been in productive dialogue with the burgeoning field of the sociology of culture. At the very least, cultural sociologists'

effort to rethink the relations between structure, agency, and culture produced among many movement scholars a new skepticism of conceptual oppositions that had been previously taken for granted, for example, between hard, objective, constraining structure and soft, subjective, enabling culture. In addition, however, movement scholars began to draw conceptual frameworks from the sociology of culture, ranging from Swidler's toolkits to Bakhtin's dialogism to Bourdieu's cultural capital.

The result of these developments has been much greater attention to cultural processes in mobilization along with a more sophisticated set of tools for theorizing movements' causes and consequences. Still, even as they have embraced stronger models of culture, social movement theorists generally have been unwilling to abandon a belief in the power of structure in accounting for movements' emergence and the role of strategy in accounting for movements' outcomes. They are unwilling to treat culture as free-floating. They remain certain that movements, no matter how seemingly sudden, explosive, ephemeral, and evanescent, never come out of nowhere. They remain convinced that Mancur Olson's question—Why would people participate in collective action rather than free-ride on the efforts of others?—remains the central one to be answered in accounting for individual participation. With respect to how movements unfold, most scholars continue to insist that activists, whatever else they are (emotional, moral, social, sensual), are strategic actors. Activists face cultural challenges that, like a deficit of funding or a repressive political context, *can* be overcome but tend to operate with predictable effects.

Perhaps movement scholars' vehemence in these respects comes in reaction to still-popular images of protest as spontaneous and protesters as zealots. Far from an impediment, however, I believe that these commitments have led movement scholars to wrestle in productive ways with the interplay of culture, structure, and strategy. For example, some scholars sought to extend structuralist models to account for the constitution of new identities, drawing on network analysis to show that mobilizing identities come not from fixed categories like race, class, gender, or nation, but from common positions in networks of urban residence (Gould 1995) or political affiliation (Mische 2007). Other scholars have emphasized not political opportunity but threat—and the "moral shock" that often accompanies it—in turning people into collective actors (Jasper 2006). Still others have continued to argue for the importance of political opportunities but have emphasized the cultural dimensions of those opportunities. Political structures differ across time and place not only in their formal provisions (for example, limits on the executive branch and a system of checks and balances) but also in officials' conceptions of the proper scope and role of government (Gamson and Meyer 1996). Something as ostensibly noncultural as a state's level of repression reflects not only numbers of soldiers and guns but the strength of constitutional provisions for their use and traditions of military allegiance (della Porta 1996). The changing legitimacy rules for world leadership provide activists with differential opportunities to embarrass national governments into a more proactive stance (Skrentny 1998).

Scholars have also modified the political-opportunities-plus-mobilizing-structures-plus-frames-equals-protest scenario by emphasizing the cultural dimensions of mobilizing structures (Taylor 1989) and by arguing that powerful frames can mobilize people even in the absence of political opportunities and mobilizing structures (McCammon 2001). Scholars have probed the features of movements and organizations that predispose them to generate effective frames (Snow and Cress 2000) and have explored the conditions in which frames are likely to resonate (Williams 2004; Ferree et al. 2001).

In these lines of investigation, culture was still treated as a tool that activists employ to recruit supporters and press their claims. But movement scholars have also begun to probe the cultural construction of the strategic. For example, Tilly's concept of a "repertoire of protest" was intended to capture the fact that at any given time, only a limited range of claim-making forms is considered possible and desirable. Such "collectively-learned shared understandings . . .," Tilly (1999, 419) wrote, "greatly constrain the contentious claims political actors make on each other and on agents of the state." Clemens (1997) and Steinberg (1999) have extended the concept of repertoire to apply to organizational forms and claims' content. Both authors emphasized the flexibility of repertoires, with Clemens drawing attention to activists' ability to put prescribed forms to new purposes and Steinberg highlighting their ability to exploit the silences and contradictions in dominant discourses. Still, each one highlighted constraint alongside creativity.

As these examples should indicate, theorizing about all phases of mobilization has increasingly adopted a view of culture as objective, rather than only subjective; as constitutive of interests, rather than only expressive of them; and as setting the terms of strategic action rather than only used strategically—this, without abandoning the belief that challenging ideas, no matter how resonant, are more likely to mobilize people in some circumstances than others, and without abandoning the belief that some strategies, tactics, targets, and frames are objectively more effective than others.

## One Approach: Culture as Institutional Schemas

One thread of research and theorizing among social movement scholars concerned with culture focuses on culture less as people's formal worldviews and values (although those are certainly cultural, too) than as their ideas about how the organizations and institutions in which they participate do and should work. The focus is on the *how* of interaction: the models, schemas, recipes, and rules of thumb that people rely on to do science, for example, or obstetrics or race relations (Clemens and Cook 1999; Sewell 1992). To be sure, framing theorists tapped the concept of "schema" to draw attention to the interpretive dimension of collective action: how activists define a problem determines whether people will mobilize around it. What distinguishes the approach that I want to highlight



is its focus on *institutional* schemas: on the models underpinning sets of routinized practices around a culturally defined purpose (Jepperson 1991).

For students of movements, treating culture as institutional schemas or models has several analytical virtues. For one thing, it treats culture as constitutive of interests and identities but also as circulating through networks, backed up by resources, and employed in the service of organizational agendas. Why some schemas rather than others come to dominate an institution has to do with resources and power—culture is not unmoored from structures of power and resources. Once a schema begins to gain purchase, however, it creates stakes in its enforcement and interpretation (and, for some, in its challenge). Once fully current, it becomes the stuff of common sense. In principle, one can imagine other ways of doing things and other ways of assessing things. And multiple schemas may operate within the same institution and only become perceived as inconsistent—or their inconsistency only perceived as a problem—under certain circumstances (Swidler 2003). Still, alternatives are always vulnerable to being penalized as “not the way we do things” and as inappropriate.

A second virtue of this perspective on culture is that it encourages us to think about mobilization differently: not as the result of long-standing actors with stable interests confronting new political opportunities but, rather, as familiar, routinized practices becoming problematic in a way that creates new actors and interests in contention. In this respect, to talk about institutional *schemas* alerts us to the dynamics by which people’s commonsensical ideas about how to do science or obstetrics or race relations are variously established, reproduced, and made vulnerable—this, all before activists “framing” the cause even exist. To talk about *institutional* schemas alerts us to the likelihood that the dynamics by which organized science or obstetrics or race relations become arenas of contention differ from those by which the state does. The latter insight is essential to loosening the conceptual grip of the state on models of movement emergence. The discrediting of old institutional schemas or the ascendance of new ones, conflicts among schemas previously seen as congruent, people’s ability to use schemas from one institution as standards for measuring the performance of another institution—each of these developments may generate new lines of contention.

In turn, contention may have its primary impact by altering schemas, that is, by altering the rules of the institutional game. For example, while feminist activists in the Catholic Church failed in their goal of gaining women ordination, they did change the terms of debate. Women’s issues—reproductive rights, for example, and women’s roles in church doctrine as well as the church hierarchy—could no longer be kept off the agenda. Cultural changes thus reshape institutional practices; as Mary Katzenstein (1998, 17) put it, “Conceptual changes bear directly on material ones.” As another example, mobilization gained AIDS activists formal representation on AIDS research boards but, more important, redefined what counted as scientific expertise in far-reaching ways (Epstein 1996).

Finally, treating culture as institutionalized schemas helps to get at the processes by which culture sets the terms of tactical choice. Familiar ways of doing things and seeing things shape activists' strategic possibilities. This is not because alternatives are unthinkable but because the risks of nonconformity are substantial, whether in a small group of like-minded activists or in an appearance before Congress, and the rewards are uncertain.

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*Familiar ways of doing things and seeing things shape activists' strategic possibilities.*

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Armstrong and Bernstein (2008) argue that an institutionalist perspective represents the lineaments of a new model of social movements. Whether or not that is true, movement scholars have used conceptions of culture similar to the one I have described in ways that are especially valuable to cultural sociologists.

## Culture and Contention

Although much of the time prevailing beliefs reproduce the status quo, at others, they are turned against dominant structures. How does that happen? When does culture become a counterhegemonic force? Scholars have sometimes relied on movements to answer that question. For example, consider the following formulations: "Explicit cultural ideologies emerge *during 'unsettled' historical periods* when such coherent systematic worldviews can powerfully influence their adherents" (Swidler 1995, 34, emphasis added). "*In the context of acute social conflict . . . subcultural havens may become oppositional or countercultural social spaces that are capable of being mobilized by movements, thus posing a direct threat to elites*" (Fantasia and Hirsch 1995, 157, emphasis added). "*During crises . . . different ways of doing things are now conceivable to policymakers and the public*" (J. Hart 1992, 640, emphasis added).

The argument for culture in these formulations is plausible, but it is a weak rather than a strong one: cultural challenge is possible and/or matters when social, political, and economic structures have become unstable. But if counterhegemonic discourse becomes effective only when structural conditions are destabilized, then should we not be studying the structural factors generating disequilibrium rather than the cultural challenge that only then comes into play? Without theorizing the actual dynamics by which movements emerge, sociological accounts of movements

can fall back into a barely disguised structuralism (political turmoil generates movements, which in turn generate cultural challenge).

A more persuasive alternative is to say that structures' reproduction is never guaranteed, precisely because of structures' dependence on cultural schemas. In William Sewell's (1992) well-known formulation, the multiplicity of structures and the transposability of schemas put structures always at risk. Any society is made up of multiple structures—religion, Catholicism, Protestantism, friendship, capitalism—that variously overlap, mesh, and conflict. The fact that people can transpose schemas means that they can use schemas drawn from one institutional sphere to evaluate and transform practices in another. For example, Polish activists drew on a moral idiom from Catholicism to attack the communist regime. The striking hospital workers whom Karen Brodtkin Sacks (1988) studied invoked notions of family to describe the acknowledgment and care they expected from hospital management. Transposed from one sphere to another, a familiar schema provided an idiom for formulating opposition.

Familiar schemas may also provide insight into how opposition emerges in the first place, that is, into how institutional practices formerly viewed as natural, right, unchangeable, or unimportant become open to transformation. One example comes from abortion activism in the United States. As Kristin Luker (1984) showed, institutionalized practices of legal abortion in the early 1960s were governed by two very different but rarely discussed moral schemas: a "strict constructionist" one, in which the fetus was a full person, albeit unborn (whose abortion was justified only when its survival jeopardized the life of the mother), and a "broad constructionist" schema, in which the fetus was a *potential* person (and appropriately aborted if indications were strong that it would be abnormal). As medical advances made abortions to save the life of the mother an increasing rarity, the potential for conflict between the two perspectives increased. That conflict broke out into the open in 1962 when the story was publicized of a woman who planned to terminate her pregnancy after discovering that her fetus was likely to be deformed. Doctors adhering to a broad constructionist model worried about not having legal protection for the therapeutic abortions they were performing routinely. They suddenly found themselves with stakes in a movement for abortion reform, and they played a key role in forming one.

Another example comes from the 1950s homophile movement. As John D'Emilio (1983) pointed out in his history of the movement, same-sex sex has always existed and, indeed, has often been severely punished. But it was only in the mid-twentieth century that it became not just a deviant, immoral, illegal *act* but a deviant *identity*. A homosexual was a person whose acts, feelings, personal traits, even body type were sharply distinguishable from those of "normal" heterosexuals. That shift was propelled in part by a psychiatric model of homosexuality that gained currency during and after World War II. It made possible both heightened repression (one could now be fired or prosecuted as a homosexual whether or not one had engaged in sex) and the creation of a homosexual collective actor.

If, in Luker's (1984) case, people developed new interests in contention when the moral schema governing their practices lost credibility, and in D'Emilio's (1983) case, they did so when a new schema gained institutional currency, Michael Young (2007) described yet another scenario: that the schemas from different institutions may combine in a way that produces new stakes in protest. In the 1830s, mainstream Protestant churches were creating a vast network of benevolent societies aimed at eradicating national sins like Sabbath-breaking and drinking at the same time as upstart Methodist sects were popularizing a revivalist style that focused on public confession. Schemas of sin and confession joined to produce what Young called a confessional mode of protest. This mode of protest animated national campaigns for temperance and abolition and against vice, and it fused bids for self- and social transformation—this, a century and a half before the “lifestyle politics” of the so-called new social movements.

Luker (1984), D'Emilio (1983), and Young (2007) sought to explain not why the state became vulnerable to challenge by already-constituted groups but why certain issues, practices, and identities came to be contested in the first place. Each study explored the interaction of structural trends and cultural schemas. Doctors' stake in abortion reform made sense only in the context of broad changes in the organization and practice of medicine *and* in the context of competing understandings of the ontological status of the fetus. Psychiatrists' promotion of a view of homosexuality as a deviant identity would not have led to the development of a homosexual collective actor had it not intersected with long-term processes of urbanization and industrialization that made newly possible the development of an autonomous personal life. Drinking and slavery became problems demanding immediate personal action when they were experienced in terms of the schemas promoted by a powerful religious institution and an upstart one that was becoming increasingly competitive.

The fact that, in Sewell's (1992) words, any society comprises multiple structures suggests something else: that some institutional practices draw their legitimacy from, and suffer disrepute as a result of, the relations they are seen to have with other institutions. They may lose credibility by something like a symbolic contagion, as they are associated with other discredited institutions. In her study of radical challenges to science, Kelly Moore (2008) showed that organized American science at the beginning of the 1960s was flush with money, power, and prestige. The fact that science's status after WWII was so harnessed to its mutually supportive relationship with the federal government, however, meant that when the government came under challenge in the 1960s, science was implicated too. In the same vein, Steven Epstein (1996) attributed the rise of an AIDS movement challenging medical researchers in part to more general public skepticism about the authority of experts.

Finally, movements themselves may be the source of new interests. This is not only in the sense that clusters of movements generate master frames that figure in subsequent protest; for example, the equal rights frame that gained currency in the civil rights movement and was then promoted by the women's movement and the disability movement (Snow and Benford 1992). It is also that movements

produce new ways of making sense of one's life, as Joseph Davis (2005) demonstrated in his study of the movement against child sexual abuse. Before the antirape movement of the late 1960s, child sexual abuse was largely viewed through the lens of family systems and psychoanalytic therapies. Harm to the victim was not considered inevitable and was rarely thought to be long-lasting. Family members, and even the victim, were often seen as collusive with the abuser in tolerating the abuse. That account changed in the 1970s, when antirape and child protection movements converged on the issue of child sexual abuse. The rape experience was transposed to the experience of sexually abused children. In the new schema, abuse was widespread but unrecognized, even by victims themselves; victimization was clear-cut; and harm was profound and long-lasting. The appropriate response to such abuse was also defined by the antirape movement. It "emphasized believing victims, affirming inner strength, rejecting guilt, expressing anger, and claiming rights," Davis (2005, 96) wrote. Along the way, family systems and psychoanalytic accounts of child sexual abuse and its variable consequences were excised from the standard account.

In sum, movement scholars have not disagreed with cultural sociologists' belief that movements are often vehicles of transformative cultural challenge. But in accounting for movements' emergence, they offer valuable insight into the conditions in which culture becomes a mobilizing force. The studies I have highlighted show, on one hand, that the political shifts and institutional crises that could be labeled structural turmoil are in part cultural, and, on the other, that the cultural dimensions of institutional practices can be analytically disentangled from the structural ones so as to study their interplay. This, in turn, makes it possible to predict the moments at which, or kinds of cleavages around which, contention is likely to develop.

A view of structures as schemas invested with and sustaining resources has another implication for movement theorists. It suggests not only that structures are always contestable but also that there are continuities between existing relations and the challenges that are made to them. Just as a too-rigid distinction between culture and structure neglects the cultural dimensions of structural opportunities, it also neglects the structuring of cultural challenge, that is, its reproduction of broader asymmetries of power.

## Culture and Strategy

Treating culture as schemas—that is, expectations about how things do and should work—has been useful not only in capturing culture's variable power relative to structure in constituting interests but also in capturing the mechanisms by which culture constrains practical action. The challenge, of course, lies in the fact that people can think anything they want. To talk about how culture constrains practical action risks suggesting that people are cultural dopes or strategic dupes, somehow blind to better options that we analysts can see. And activists,

who have a real stake in strategic action, tend to be pretty savvy in discerning the options available to them and how to best capitalize on them. But that fact opens up two lines of valuable investigation. One is into how activists struggle with the cultural schemas that are institutionalized in the spheres in which they contend: in the law and in news reporting, to name two. The other line of investigation is into whether and how popular schemas—of protest, politics, organization, and instrumental rationality—enter into activists' own strategizing, and with what effect.

The assumption underlying the first line of investigation is that culture constrains not by limiting what people can think but by limiting what they can say. Institutional conventions of cultural expression and evaluation shape the claims one can easily make. Some conventions are formalized, some are not. For example, a judge can tell a story in court while a defendant may be penalized for doing so. A plaintiff in small claims court may be encouraged to tell a personal story and then penalized nonetheless because her or his story does not demonstrate the clear lines of cause and effect that even small claims court judges expect (Conley and O'Barr 1990).

Routines of news reporting, courtroom interaction, fund-raising appeals, and talk show performance encourage activists to present some complaints and not others, to invoke certain kinds of justifications, to display certain emotions, to present certain people as spokespersons, and so on. In her study of activism by adult survivors of child abuse, Nancy Whittier (2001) found that when survivors gathered in movement conferences and at marches, speakers told stories of personal fortitude. They described fear and self-loathing yielding to grief, anger, and finally to the strength that came from casting off shame. With titles like "Sing Loud, Sing Proud," and "Courageous—Always Courageous," movement magazine articles and workshops encouraged participants to emphasize their recovery rather than the details of their abuse. When survivors appeared in court, however, they were encouraged to focus on the fear, grief, shame, and hurt produced by their abuse. These kinds of emotional performances were required, Whittier wrote, to prove that the survivor was a victim deserving of compensation. Advice articles in movement magazines warned those going to court that the experience would be demeaning. They should be prepared to tell their stories in the ways expected of them, should avoid betraying their anger or pride, but should find outlets outside court in which to tell other parts of their story. On television talk shows, another place in which child abuse activists appeared frequently in the 1980s, survivors focused more on the abuse and its traumatizing effects than on the survivor's eventual recovery. Accompanied by therapists, guests often cried while clutching stuffed animals or speaking in childlike voices. Whittier argued that by eliciting pity and horror in audiences, survivors' stances on talk shows may have made it more difficult for audiences to identify with them. And by representing themselves as passive and powerless (an image reinforced by the presence of therapists), survivors may have repelled others suffering from abuse, who might have been mobilized by expressions of focused anger and stories of personal overcoming.

Certainly, one can refuse the conventions of cultural performance. Survivors could have been angry on talk shows and prideful in courtroom hearings. But doing so would have been risky. Culture shapes strategy in the sense that abiding by the rules of cultural expression yields more calculable consequences than contesting them. For example, feminists who challenged workplace discrimination in court in the 1980s were encouraged to put women on the stand who could testify to their experience of aspiring to a higher paying but traditionally masculine job and not getting it. Now, providing a few such witnesses could not, on its own, demonstrate *patterns* of disparate treatment. Feminists could have refused on entirely logical grounds to frame their claims in terms of individuals' experience of discrimination. But when they did refuse, they were much more likely to lose their cases (Schultz 1990). The problem was not only that activists had to sign on to a strategy that was fundamentally illogical. By arguing that women had the same aspirations as men, aspirations that were frustrated by sexist managers, plaintiffs left intact the idea that career aspirations are only shaped in childhood rather than shaped in the labor market itself. But how a job is publicized and advertised profoundly influences which potential candidates will see themselves as qualified for it. The question that plaintiffs should have been able to ask was, Why would women want a job that was universally seen as a man's job?

Studies of movement strategy thus shed light on the trade-offs that come both with hewing to cultural convention and challenging it. They also help to explain such trade-offs. Why were judges so insistent on women testifying that they had wanted the sales commission jobs? Because they needed a story that could legitimately counter the schema or, better, the cluster of schemas that together made up a common sense about gender and work and that employers could rely on in insisting that women did not want the jobs. Claims that women had different job aspirations than men made sense when heard against the backdrop of stories of women having different biologies than men and stories of little girls being different from little boys and stories about some kinds of jobs being "heavy" and "dirty" and stories of mothers providing a haven in a heartless world and fathers bringing home the bacon and so on. In contrast to these stories, diverse and with the rich variegation that made them seem to approximate reality, the plaintiffs' contrasting story could not but seem thin and abstract.

The larger point is this: challengers' claims are heard against the backdrop not of a single canonical story but rather of many familiar stories that navigate similarly between culturally privileged and denigrated poles of well-known symbolic oppositions. By showing what activists are up against when they challenge the status quo, movement studies thus render empirically structuralist and poststructuralist theories of culture and power at the same time as they modify those theories (Polletta 2006).

It is hardly surprising, moreover, that conventions of cultural expression enter into activists' own tactical calculations. This is the second line of investigation I mentioned. The animal rights activists whom Julian Groves (2001) studied discouraged women from serving in leadership positions because they believed that women were seen by the public as prone to the kind of emotionalism that would cost the movement credibility. Activists spent little time debating whether

women were in fact prone to emotionalism, however, or whether emotional accounts were more or less effective than rational arguments. Their calculations were strategic but based on gendered schemas of reason and emotion. The anti-Gulf War activists observed by Stephen Hart (2001) relied on a pragmatic, nuts-and-bolts style in their internal discussions, effectively ruling out of order discussions of participants' personal commitments or broad ideological visions. But that "constrained" discursive style served them less effectively than did the "expansive" discourse characteristic of faith-based organizing groups, in which participants' ethical commitments were threaded through all discussions. A discourse valued for its pragmatism, ironically, proved less effective than one valued for its moral depth.

Of course, a logic of appropriateness need not always trump a logic of instrumental rationality. As Elisabeth Clemens (1997) pointed out with respect to organizational forms, activists can modify and combine familiar forms to create the kinds of hybrids that are publicly viewed as appropriate and yet are different enough to be effective. Women activists barred from formal politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries drew on alternative associational forms such as the club, parlor meeting, and charitable society to become a major force for social reform. Still, familiarity also comes with dangers. In tracing experiments in radical democracy in seven movements over the past hundred years, I found that activists tended to model their deliberations variously on the relations between religious fellows, teachers and learners, or friends (Polletta 2002). While each relationship supplied the mutual trust and respect that made it possible for activists to deliberate with a minimum of negotiation and challenge, each one also came with norms that, in predictable circumstances, made consensus impossible and generated sometimes debilitating organizational crises. For instance, friendship's tendency to exclusivity and its aversion to difference made it difficult for 1960s activists to expand their groups beyond an original core. When they tried to implement mechanisms designed to equalize power, friendship's resistance to formalization impeded their efforts. When newcomers joined the group or when veterans experienced disagreement as betrayal, deliberation broke down.

Together, these studies elucidate the conventions that govern activists' uses of cultural forms (from emotional performances to legal categories to styles of discourse to organizational structures), and they trace the consequences of those conventions for movement groups' capacities to effect changes. Rather than treating culture as the opposite of strategy, they show the ways in which culture sets the very terms of strategic action. But far from free-floating, culture is treated as anchored in legal rules, norms of emotional expression, familiar relationships, and traditions of progressive politics.

## Conclusion

In my earlier work, I complained that social movement scholars, while not ignoring culture, had tended to treat it as a residual category. Using culture to explain what structure did not explain in accounting for movements' emergence



missed how actors' interests in transforming structures were constituted in the first place. Using culture to explain what instrumental rationality did not explain in accounting for movements' choice of strategies left unexamined where activists' ideas about what was instrumental came from—and what effect those ideas had on groups' success or failure. Using culture to account for the changes wrought by movements outside the formal sphere of politics missed some of the cultural changes that movements effected within politics.

But now, as I survey the field, I am actually struck by how much work has proceeded along just the lines I have described. I am struck even more by the fact that as much as the sociology of social movements needs the sociology of culture, the sociology of culture needs the sociology of social movements. Movements both reflect and help to create the “unsettled times” that cultural sociologists see as crucibles for change. Studying the dynamics of movements' emergence has shed light on the conditions in which cultural challenge explodes structural relations, without reducing those conditions to structural voids. At the same time, movements often reproduce within their own operation the cultural frameworks that make protest a relatively rare event. In exploring the tension between challenge and accommodation, between innovation and constraint, movement theorists have contributed to our understanding of cultural processes much more broadly.

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This is not to say that students of movements have culture all sewn up. To the contrary, important gaps remain. In this article, I have focused on movements' emergence and their trajectories, leaving aside the issue of their impacts. This is because we still know little about movements' cultural impacts (Earl 2004): not only what those impacts typically consist of but also when such impacts are more significant than changes in formal policy. I have urged an approach to culture that focuses more on people's beliefs about appropriate means than on their beliefs about appropriate ends, more on institutional schemas than on cultural values. But such an approach is not without problems. In particular, sociologists have devoted far more attention to specifying institutional schemas theoretically than methodologically. There are some exceptions (see Schneiberg and Clemens 2006; Polletta 2006), but we still have nothing like the methodological precision of psychological treatments of cognitive schemas.

Further study of movements should help to fill each of these gaps. Movements are not the total rupture with the status quo that their participants would sometimes like them to be; nor are they simply the continuation of routine politics by other means that social movement scholars have sometimes portrayed them. This is what makes them both practically effective and theoretically fascinating.

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