

## **Snarls, Quacks, and Quarrels: Culture and Structure in Political Process Theory**

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*Political process theories of social movements have relied on a set of oppositions between culture and structure that has limited their capacity to capture the supraindividual, durable, and constraining dimensions of culture. The solution is not to abandon an emphasis on "objective" political structures in favor of potential insurgents' "subjective" perceptions of political opportunities, but rather to probe the (objective) resources and constraints generated by the cultural dimensions of political structures. Such a perspective would pay closer attention to the cultural traditions, ideological principles, institutional memories, and political taboos that create and limit political opportunities; and would link the "master frames" that animate protest to dominant political structures and processes.*

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As Goodwin and Jasper note, leading exponents of political process theory have recognized the limitations of strict political opportunity models, in which the opening of political opportunities is necessary and sufficient cause of mobilization. Doug McAdam, for example, argues that, "the dominance, within the United States, of the 'resource mobilization' and 'political process' perspectives has privileged the political, organizational, and network/structural aspects of social movements while giving the more cultural or ideational dimensions of collective action short shrift" (1994:36). McAdam and others have responded by trying "to incorporate what we know about the role of organizations, material resources, and social struc-

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ture with culture,” as Johnston and Klandermans put it in a recent volume (1995:21).

Such efforts have been hampered by a narrow view of (political) structures as noncultural. Like Goodwin and Jasper, I believe that we can usefully adopt a less anemic conception of culture than some political process analyses have done without making actors, interests, strategies, and resources simply figments of a culturalist imagination. However, by characterizing the problem as the “structuralist bias” of current approaches, Goodwin and Jasper suggest that the problem lies in a misrecognition of the nonstructural—i.e. cultural—dimensions of political institutions and practices. I argue to the contrary that structures *are* cultural (although not only cultural). The task is not to abandon an emphasis on “objective” political structures in favor of potential insurgents’ “subjective” perceptions and valuations of political structures, but to probe the (objective) resources and constraints generated by the cultural dimensions of political structures.

To develop this argument, I critique formulations of the culture/structure relationship by leading political process theorists. Some authors associated with the political process model have avoided the theoretical traps I describe, and every author who figures in my criticisms has also contributed to the analytical alternatives I endorse. This suggests that the problem lays in the appealing familiarity of certain widespread but limiting understandings of culture, an appeal to which sociologists both inside and outside the field of social movements have been vulnerable.

### CULTURE VERSUS STRUCTURE<sup>2</sup>

In spite of his intention to grant culture its proper due, McAdam’s formulation of the problem, as quoted previously, gives away the game. Analysts have mistakenly concentrated on the “political, organizational, and network/structural aspects of social movements,” he argues, at the expense of the “cultural and ideational dimensions.” By implication, then, the former are noncultural. He goes on:

It is extremely hard to separate these objective shifts in political opportunities from the subjective processes of social construction and collective attribution that render

<sup>2</sup>Political process theorists have used the term *structure* in two ways: to describe a configuration of political opportunities (“political opportunity structure”) and to describe those political institutions, arrangements, and processes that distinguish one political context from another (in comparative studies of movement emergence) or that change in some crucial fashion (in longitudinal studies of movement emergence). My objections are to the latter use of the term *structure*. With respect to the former, political process theorists now more commonly refer to political “processes” and “opportunities” than to a “political opportunity structure” (see, for example, Tarrow, 1998:77).

**Table I.** Conceptions of Culture and Structure in Recent Political Process Analyses

Culture	Political Structure
1. Subjective	Objective
2. Malleable	Durable
3. Enables protest (voluntarist)	Constrains protest (determinist)
4. Mobilized by the powerless to challenge structure	Monopolized by the powerful to maintain power

them meaningful. . . . Given this linkage, the movement analyst has two tasks: accounting for the structural factors that have objectively strengthened the challenger's hand, and analyzing the processes by which the meaning and attributed significance of shifting political conditions is assessed. (1994:39)

McAdam insists on distinguishing “objective” “structural” opportunities from the “subjective, cultural” framing of those opportunities. Culture mediates between objective political opportunities and objective mobilization, on this view; it does not create those opportunities (see also McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 1996:8; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 1997:158).

The restriction of culture to insurgents' framing efforts reflects a deeper opposition between structure and culture that has characterized sociological analysis more broadly (Sewell, 1992; Hays, 1994). In social movement theory, the opposition takes the following form. Political opportunities are represented as structural, not cultural; activists' capacity to take advantage of those opportunities is cultural (although only in part cultural, because it depends also on the prior networks that make people “structurally available” to participate [McAdam, 1994]).

Let me list the set of contrasts underpinning this conception of culture's role in mobilization.<sup>3</sup> Cultural processes shape potential challengers' perception of objective opportunities (1; see Table I); culture is malleable, whereas structure, by definition, refers to relations that are beyond the control of individual actors (2); political structures and processes make possible the expression of preexisting grievances and identities, they do not constitute them (3); cultural processes guide the actions of insurgents, not those of institutional political actors (4).

Two confusions lay behind these claims, neither specific to the authors I have named and neither restricted to the analysis of social movements. First, because “structure” is counterposed to both “agency” and “culture,” the latter two are often implicitly aligned (Hays, 1994, makes the same point). Culture becomes agency. The result is that culture is made overly

<sup>3</sup>In addition to those I list, another opposition has surfaced in informal discussions: between “soft” cultural analysis and “hard” structural analysis. Hays (1994) sees this opposition as well as a “material/ideal” dichotomy and the others I have listed as recurrent features of sociological analyses more broadly.

subjectivist and voluntarist; the ways in which culture constrains are obscured. This is evident in McAdam's argument that "expanding political opportunities . . . offer insurgents a certain objective 'structural potential' for collective action. Mediating between opportunity and action are people and the subjective meanings they attach to their situations" (McAdam, 1982:48; see also McAdam, 1994, 1996; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 1996). In other words, structural opportunities are "given," are beyond actors' control; actors' strategic construction of those opportunities turn them into an impetus to action. So culture constrains action only insofar as it impedes actors' capacity to perceive the system's objective vulnerability.<sup>4</sup>

The second confusion is between culture as a sphere of activity and target of protest and culture as a dimension of all structures and practices, including political ones. Political process theorists—and sympathetic critics—have tended to miss the latter. Thus, Gamson and Meyer argue that, "Opportunity has a strong cultural component and we miss something important when we limit our attention to variance in political institutions and the relationships among political actors" (1996:279), implying that these are noncultural. Gamson and Meyer's typology of factors generating political opportunities relies on a "cultural (society)—institutional (state)" axis, again suggesting that state institutions are noncultural. McAdam's account at one point betrays both elisions: "the kinds of structural changes and power shifts that are most defensibly conceived as political opportunities should not be confused with the collective processes by which these changes are interpreted and framed" (1996:26; emphasis in the original). So "cultural factors or processes" are contrasted both with structure, which is given, not interpreted; and with political institutions and developments, which are noncultural.<sup>5</sup>

An alternative conception of culture views it as the symbolic dimension of all structures, institutions, and practices (political, economic, educational,

<sup>4</sup>By contrast, Tilly argues that "[C]ulture constrained *holders of power* . . . courts accepted arguments that made the killing of a policeman 'justifiable homicide,' masters recognized obligations to their unemployed workers, householders knew the meaning of lighted candles in a window" (1995:40; my emphasis). Tilly's point that repertoires of contention refer to routinized relations between claimants and the targets of their claims, and that they are based on shared standards of justice and worth, seems in some tension with McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly's (1996) discussion, in which they urge the integration of culture and political opportunity, but limit such an integration to recognizing the role of collective attribution on the part of members of the aggrieved population, thus exempting powerholders from the influence of culture.

<sup>5</sup>Elsewhere, McAdam outlines a set of "cultural opportunities"—sudden disasters like Three Mile Island that spur public opposition to a broader condition, or the events, like the Brown versus Board decision, that demonstrate system vulnerability. However, his distinction between structural and cultural opportunities is not accompanied by any discussion of their relationship, leaving the impression that there is none and that structural opportunities are noncultural.

etc.). Symbols are signs that have meaning and significance through their interrelations. The pattern of those relations is culture. Culture is thus patterned and patterning; it is enabling as well as constraining; and it is observable in linguistic practices, institutional rules, and social rituals rather than existing only in people's minds. This understanding of culture puts us in a better position to grasp conceptually and empirically the generation of cultural but "objective" opportunities—objective in the sense of prior to insurgents' interpretative activities (in contrast to claims 1 and 4); to grasp culture's durable character (in contrast to claim 2); and to identify political institutions' and processes' role in constituting grievances, identities, and goals (in contrast to claim 3).

### CULTURE AND OPPORTUNITY

Culture plays an important role in creating political opportunities, and not just in the subjective perceptions of insurgents. As Gamson and Meyer (1996) point out, differing political opportunity structures reflect not just different political systems—for example, limits on the executive branch and a system of checks and balances—but also different public conceptions of the proper scope and role of the state. "State policies are not only technical solutions to material problems of control or resource extraction," Friedland and Alford argue in the same vein. "They are rooted in changing conceptions of what the state is, what it can and should do" (1991:238). State-makers and managers, like challengers, are suspended in webs of meaning (Goodwin, 1994). In explaining the rise of the civil rights movement, John Skrentny (1998) traces the American government's postwar sensitivity to charges of racism before a world audience to a transnational culture of human rights. The structural opportunity for activists was the superpowers' cold war competition for influence in the developing nations, but that competition was shaped by the nations' obligation, new since World War II, to adhere to human rights standards in order to claim status as world leaders.

Another example of the cultural dimensions of structural opportunities: elections are often represented as key components of the political opportunity structure, but whether elections "open" or "close" political opportunities surely has to do with whether elections have historically been catalysts to collective action, and whether there is a "collective memory" of state-targeted protest. Something as ostensibly noncultural as a state's repressive capacity reflects not only numbers of soldiers and guns, but also the strength of constitutional provisions for their use and traditions of military allegiance. In her discussion of protest policing, Donatella della

Porta observes that whereas the West German police force “views itself as a part of a normative order that accepts the rule of the law” (quoting Katzenstein, 1990:1), the Italian police “since the creation of the Italian state had been accustomed to seeing itself as the *longa manus* of the executive power, and thus put preservation of law and order before the control of crime” (1996:83). These views, in turn, influenced the opportunities for different forms of protest.<sup>6</sup> Charles Brockett likewise draws attention to the role that collective memories of state repression played in Salvadoran and Guatemalan elites’ calculation of the costs and benefits of repression:

Guatemalan elites considering violence only needed to refer to 1966–72 when over 10,000 innocents were murdered or to the 22-year reign of terror of Manuel Estrada Cabrera early in the century. Going further back in time, elites in both countries evaluating violence as an instrument of control could recall the coercion employed in converting peasant food-crop land to elite-owned coffee land beginning in the latter third of the nineteenth century, or they could go all the way back to the massive violence of the Conquest itself and the consequent coercion utilized to maintain colonial society. (1995:129–130)

Brockett quotes Gurr approvingly: “Historical traditions of state terror . . . probably encourage elites to use terror irrespective of . . . structural factors” (1995:130).

Note that these traditions, principles, codes, and arrangements cannot easily be “thought away” by insurgents. They are structural in the sense that they are supra-individual and constrain individual action. They are cultural in the sense that they are symbolic; they are ways of ordering reality. By limiting the operation of culture to insurgents’ “subjective awareness,” their “perceptual” capacities (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald, 1996:8), political process theorists have obscured these potentially important and observable features of political systems. Note also that some of the above—for example, state officials’ ideological assumptions—may exercise only transient and/or weak influence on political opportunities; others, such as state legitimacy (Oberschall, 1996), may have stronger effects and be less malleable, and still others, like conventions of political commemoration (Olick and Levy 1997), may be somewhere in between. The durability/malleability of culture is variable rather than definable *a priori*.

Finally, all of these factors operate in the sphere of institutional politics. To take culture into account does not detract from the importance of, and

<sup>6</sup>della Porta argues that such differences demonstrate the role of “institutions and political culture” in producing a stable set of political opportunities (1996:83). She thus recognizes the importance of culture in creating opportunities separate from the perceptions of insurgents, but unnecessarily distinguishes institutions from culture. Institutions, in Friedland and Alford’s persuasive definition, are “supra-organizational patterns of activity through which humans conduct their material life in time and space, and symbolic systems through which they categorize that activity and infuse it with meaning” (1991:232; my emphasis).

a focus on, political structures and processes in generating opportunities. Rather, it recognizes the cultural dimensions of political structures.<sup>7</sup> How does this contribute to our understanding of movement emergence? Structures, in Sewell's (1992) persuasive definition, are cultural schemata invested with and sustaining resources; in other words, schemata that reflect and reproduce unevenly distributed power (note that schemata and resources are equally important to the definition).<sup>8</sup> This helps to explain structures' durability and their transformation. It is not that they bring about their own mutation, not that they have agency, but that they are invested with meanings that provide resources for insurgents challenging those structures. People can "transpose schemas" from one setting to another. For example, they can turn the worker solidarity fostered by capitalist production into a force for radical action (Sewell, 1992; see also Clemens, 1997). Sewell's scheme also reveals, contrarily, often overlooked cultural obstacles to protest. Activists' vocabularies of protest, the "master frames" (Snow and Benford, 1988) they have at their disposal, are shaped by ostensibly noncultural political, economic, and legal structures.

Let me be more specific about what this kind of conceptualization, of structure as cultural (although not only cultural), does for our understanding of movement emergence. First, it suggests more careful attention to the cultural traditions, ideological principles, institutional memories, and political taboos that guide the behavior both of political elites and challengers. To study the comparative role of elections in facilitating insurgency, we should establish whether a well-known history of election-centered protest exists, memorialized in popular narratives, holidays, and other political rituals. In comparing levels of repressive capacity, we should make note not only of the number of guns and soldiers available to the government, but also of constitutional provisions and precedents (and prevailing interpretations of those provisions and precedents) for its use of force. The changing legitimacy rules for world leadership provide activists with differential opportunities to embarrass national governments into a more re-

<sup>7</sup>Curiously, cultural elements have sometimes been included, although not labeled *cultural*, in political process theorists' enumeration of "objective" "structural" opportunities. Thus, McAdam characterizes the early political process model—anticulturalist, by his own account—as attributing the timing of movements to the "shifting institutional structure and *ideological disposition* of those in power" (1996:23; my emphasis). However, restricting culture to the ideological dispositions of those in power misses the fact that their power is constituted culturally.

<sup>8</sup>John Hall proposes a model of "*cultural structuralism*, in which social 'structural' arrangements of power and of practices are infused with cultural bases, if culture is understood, not as necessarily holistic, but as diverse configurations of institutionalized meanings, recipes, and material objects that may be differently drawn on by various actors within the same social arena or society" (1992:278).

ceptive or proactive stance. Again, all of these are features of institutional politics; all are cultural; none exist just in insurgents' minds.

Second, studying the cultural dimensions of political structures can help us to account for the "resonance" of particular frames at particular times—a question that has received insufficient attention. For example, to understand the currency of an "individual rights" frame versus a "human rights" frame, or versus a class-based frame, we should examine the legal and political traditions, systems, and rules through which those terms have become meaningful. Tarrow's point that "the French labor movement embraced an associational 'vocabulary' that reflected the *loi le Chapelier*, while American movements developed a vocabulary of 'rights' that reflected the importance of the law in American institutions and practice" (1996:50) directs us to that kind of inquiry. Popular conceptions of "equality," "personhood," and "problem" are shaped by dominant legal institutions (Merry, 1990). Neoinstitutionalist theories of organization (Jepperson and Meyer, 1991; Friedland and Alford, 1991; Clemens, 1997) should alert us to the institutional delineation of movement forms and, indeed, to the historical and cultural preeminence of the organization as a means of protest. The point is that separating the spheres of "politics" and "culture" and treating only the latter as the source of mobilizing meanings obscures those meanings' relations to, and in some cases, sources in, political structures, institutions, processes, and macrohistorical changes. Yet, this is precisely what we need to get at: how the "master frames" that inform movement idioms themselves emerge and are transformed through contention inside and outside institutional politics.

Probing insurgents' subjective assessments of objective structures would not get us very far in that task. Luckily, our analyses of culture need not be so limited.

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