

Dear Politics-Protesters,

As you will see, I am interested in how social movements respond to crises and what happens to social movements when they do what they do. More specifically, I want to know if social movements can overcome crises and innovate and, if so, in what ways. The discussions are secretly driven by a case that I have in mind, but there is no discussion of an empirical case. Not having collected sufficient data is one reason, but I am also interested in learning if the abstract discussion makes sense on its own. If it does, then I think I have a strong case.

I only have rough ideas and am fully committed to taking advantage of our workshop format. Any feedbacks on my assumptions and/or claims are welcome. Also, I am at an early stage of reviewing the relevant literature. Any references (case studies or theoretical discussions) that can help me move toward a better direction will be greatly appreciated.

Please feel free to contact me via email if you have comments and you are not attending the workshop.

Many thanks,

sun-chul

Crisis and Innovation in Social Movement Processes

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As dreadful economic news was piling up, on March 7 2009, president Obama addressed the American public through his weekly radio speech from the White House. In it, he challenged the American public "to not just hang in there but rather to see the hard times as a chance to 'discover great opportunity in the midst of great crisis'" (AP 2009). Whether or not Obama and his nation will be successful in turning the crisis situation into a new opportunity remains to be seen. However, Obama's statement does suggest an idea that has long found its place in political rhetoric and folklore alike: Crisis doesn't necessarily mean collapse; it can also mean opportunity for rebound and renewed success.

In fact, the Chinese word for crisis contains two characters, the first of which meaning crisis (危) and the second character meaning opportunity (機). Not surprisingly, history teems with instances in which new innovations and lasting change were created out of the crucibles of crisis. Both the New Deal in the 1930s and the tax cut policies in the 1980s have been widely cited as examples of how new policies emerged successfully out of crisis situations. The disciplines of economics, management, and organizations seem to abound in the study of how crises often give birth to successful change. Surprising though is the relative silence among students of social movements and contentious politics on the idea of "crisis as opportunity." Given its theoretical and empirical implications, this could be a problem.

To be fair, the notion of crisis has assumed a key place in the literature. The concept of political opportunity that has guided many research is predicated on the idea that crisis in the political environment often translates into opportunity for successful mobilization. However, the usage of crisis in this framework is limited to crises as part of the political environment external to a social movement and its actors. How social movements cope with their own crisis situation, whether caused by external or internal processes, has remained largely unexamined. Likewise, innovation, a necessary process in order to "turn crisis into opportunity," has been integrated into explanation only as a contingent event to explain how protest cycles are initiated. How it happens and whether there can be meaningful innovations in other times, including times of crisis, have also been left unexamined. As a result, social movement crisis has often been used as a precursor (or a synonym to) movement decline or demobilization, and the link between crisis and innovation in social movement processes has long remained obscure.

My intention in this essay is to share some speculative thoughts on how social movements respond to crises, innovation being one of the options. My discussion is guided by two presuppositions: 1) that social movements vary in their responses to a

crisis situation; and 2) that the varying responses of social movement actors interact with the changing political environment to generate different outcomes. To provide a full picture of the causal processes governing social movement reaction to crisis is not the goal; rather, I develop my ideas through reviewing a select number of scholarly sources to provide food for thought with the hope of stimulating further discussions. I first start with a quick review on how the social movement literature has approached crisis and innovation.

Crisis

It seems as to me there are two biases in the usage of crisis in the social movement literature that are relevant for the purpose of this essay. The first has to do with how the literature has placed limited focus on crises exogenous to social movement actors only. This was to highlight how cracks in the established institutions can be instrumental to social mobilization. The concept of political opportunity best captures this idea. In the study of social revolutions, for example, crises in the political, economic, and social system were identified as a key cause for social mobilization that eventually led to social revolutions (Marx and Engels 1972; Skocpol 1979; Goldstone 1993). Major works on social movements and contentious politics also focused on political crises as a critical condition facilitating mobilization. In doing so, various aspects of political crisis or instability have been invoked: sudden weakening of political control, deterioration in elite cohesion, election and other events that cause major shifts in political alignment (Piven and Cloward 1979; Tarrow 1989, 1998; McAdam 1998 [1982]; McAdam et al. 1996; Tilly 2006). Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani summed up the idea succinctly: "Political instability favors protest movements" (1999: 218).

In contrast to the abundant reference to crisis in the political environment in social movement studies, rarely has there been analytical attention to the crises that social movements have to face during an active campaign. We do not know much, for example, about how activists respond to a crisis situation and what its consequences are. Worse, we don't even have a working definition of a social movement crisis. Many simply assumed that crisis was a precursor to movement decline or demobilization. For example, in his study of a protest cycle that hit Italy in the late 60s and early 70s, Sidney Tarrow (1989) offers an observation of a state of affairs that we could call crisis: In the context of shrinking political opportunity, "[c]onstituents became narrower and more specialized, the number of grievances in each protest declined, and it became harder for protesters to gain popular support" (1989: 139). Tarrow (1989, 1998) also offered his take on how movement actors respond to this crisis situation. It was a bifurcated one: A small minority radicalizes their contention ending up in political isolation while a larger majority demobilizes and finds its place within the institutions.

But somehow this picture looks rigid. It doesn't allow much room for actors to change their course of action toward a positive direction. This leads to the second bias that I

believe is common when looking at crisis: an excess of determinism when it comes to perceiving how movement actors react to crisis situations and its consequences. Because the waxing and waning of a protest cycle has been seen as a function of opening and closing in the political opportunity structure, aspects of agency in the declining phase of a protest cycle have received disproportionately low attention. In contrast, the larger part of attention has been put on its early phase that usually accompanies the creative forces of innovation (this association between the early phase of a protest cycle and innovation is not unproblematic and I will return to this in the following section). It is almost as if the fate of a movement, despite all the positive legacies it might have created through partial success, is doomed once it faces crisis, and it conjures up a picture where activists are looking at their own destruction powerlessly and apathetically. Although in many cases there isn't much movement actors can do to reverse a tide of adverse circumstances, this cannot be always the case. At least, this is the idea if one is to take the idiom "crisis as opportunity" seriously.

A framework that allows us to capture the dynamics of movement actors reacting to and overcoming a crisis will also be helpful if we are to detect and shed light on such instances, but before we proceed let me offer a definition of crisis in order to operationalize it within the context of my discussion. By crisis, I mean a state in which existing organizational, tactical, and frame strategies are no longer effective due to adverse developments in internal and external circumstances. It is a situation in which established ways of movement action are called into question, as is the survival of the movement itself. Movement crisis shares many symptoms of movement decline, but can be conceptually differentiated from decline in that the latter refers to a process whereas the former refers to a state or a condition. Thus we may say that while movement decline may involve movement crisis, not all crises will end up in movement decline. There is another reason why I want to differentiate the two, and it is because the concept of movement decline connotes an irreversible process that leads to demobilization. Crisis, arguably, does not.

Let me use Doug McAdam's (1999, chapter 8) analysis for illustration. In explaining the downfall of the civil rights movement in the late 60s, McAdam identified the following as key characteristics of movement decline: diminishing organizational strength, contraction of political opportunities, growing sense of pessimism (which McAdam mentions as a reverse process of "cognitive liberation"), shift in movement goals and targets (radicalization via emergence of the black liberation movement, which he partly attributes to partial success of earlier movement action), and unfavorable responses from other parties (shrinking funds from supporting groups, countermobilization, government repression, etc.). These may be understood as circumstances that also constitute a movement crisis. Yet while these processes were used to describe demobilization with the knowledge that it eventually happened, I think it is possible to think about possible alternatives at the moment of crisis. What allows me to think this way is the thought that there could have been responses other than the ones taken.

Movement actors will likely react in different ways, which will in turn generate different outcomes.

The classical formulation of exit and voice by Albert Hirschman (1970) offers a nice starting point. While discussing how deteriorating performances of firms or other social organizations may be recuperated, Hirschman offered voice and exit as two key mechanisms. Exit refers to an option of withdrawal. Under the condition of market competition, the exit option, that is, withdrawal of consumer support toward a certain product, adds pressure to the company to make changes to compete in the market. Voice, on the other hand, refers to “any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs” (p. 30). Not surprisingly, many social movement researchers have rhetorically used exit and voice to refer to options potential supporters of a movement have: they can actively participate in collective action, or they can stay out of it or withdraw from it as they see fit. The most common way to apply this idea, it seems, has been to attach voice to the emerging phase of a movement and exit to the phase of movement decline. But I do not think voice is no less relevant in illustrating actors’ reaction when faced a movement crisis.

For example, Tarrow’s bifurcated path at the declining phase of a protest cycle illustrates both options of exit and voice. Those who don’t see a bright future in the movement exit (institutionalization), and those who are dissatisfied with the processes maintain or escalate their voice (radicalization). This formulation can also be applied to a crisis situation. Out of pessimism and despair, one can easily expect many participants to choose the exit option, thereby giving in to the crisis situation. On the other hand, we can expect others to continue their participation in movement action by maintaining the voice option. While exit involves a relatively clear action orientation (although Hirschman talks about the possibility of exiting with noise), however, there are many ways to voice when it comes to a crisis situation. Some may keep strengthen their old voice without changing their course of action (Staw et al. 1981), whereas others may voice albeit with a different tone or toward a different direction. If Tarrow’s voice option only looked at how the same voice escalated and radicalized, here we see another possibility of a voice option that involves change in the voice itself. In other words, while exit represents a single, simple option, the voice option contains in itself multiple sub-options that may evolve in different ways. As Hirschman notes, “while exit requires nothing but a clearcut either-or decision, voice is essentially an *art* constantly evolving in new directions” (italicization original; 1970: 43).

This leads me to conclude that there are at least three ways in which movement actors can react to a crisis situation:

- 1) exit: to give up activism and retreat to the quiet of everyday life.
- 2) voice-status quo: to keep the voice option without seeking new strategies.
- 3) voice-innovation: to keep the voice option by actively seeking strategies in an effort to reverse the crisis situation.

Three points are worth noting at this point. First, all three options involve different interpretive processes at the individual and group levels. Second, how the three options combine at the movement level may have significant implications for its future path. Lastly, movement actors do not perceive and act in a vacuum and the entire process will be largely affected by the external conditions within which perceptions and actions are made. I will return to these issues later, but now I move on to the topic of innovation.

Innovation

Like with crisis, I find two biases in the social movement literature on the issue of innovation that are relevant for our discussion. First, in emphasizing the role innovation plays in kicking off large-scale mobilizations, the leading theorists in the field had innovation built into the notion of a protest cycle. For example, Sidney Tarrow (1995) identified the common features of a protest cycle in terms of "heightened conflict, broad sectoral and geographical extension, the appearance of new social movement organizations and the empowerment of old ones, the creation of new 'master frames' of meaning, and the invention of new forms of collective action" (p. 92). Doug McAdam's (1995) discussion on the relationship between "initiator movements" and "spin-off movements" highlighted the role early risers play in bringing about momentum through introducing innovation. David Snow and Robert Benford (1992) proposed how a new master frame, an innovation in collective action frame, may be a key factor defining the features of cycles of protest, including the duration and intensity of the cycle. Hanspeter Kriesi and his collaborators (1995) also found a close correlation between innovation, the introduction of confrontational tactics, and the beginning stage of protest cycles.

It makes plenty of sense that innovation often takes place in the early phase of a protest cycle, for it is during such moments of madness when creativity is expressed in its fullest. And newness in organizational form, tactics, and frames is more likely to be picked up by others, diffuse through various channels, and empower political challengers when mobilization affects a large portion of the population. However, even if we admit that rapid times of change generate greater opportunity for innovation to occur and spread, there is no necessary reason to believe that innovation occurs only in the early phase of protest cycles. As Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow (2007) acknowledge, "minor innovations in performances occur all the time" (p. 20). "Most innovations fail and disappear; only a rare few fashion long-term changes in a form of contention" (Tilly 1995: 44). In fact McAdam mentions how some of the tactics widely hailed as key innovations that helped kick off the 60s civil rights movement, namely, the bus boycott and the sit-ins, had historical precedents. What made these tactics to be widely perceived as innovations of the civil rights movement was "the measure of success [they] achieved and the encouragement it afforded others to organize similar efforts elsewhere" (McAdam 1983: 741). In other words, it was not the case that

tactical innovations of bus boycott and sit-in first took place at the early phase of the civil rights movement. Rather, it was more likely that the emerging civil rights movement discovered such tactics as innovation, picked them up and made them conspicuous.

While discovering certain tactics and frames worth emulating and organizing collective action around them may be innovation in its own right, too strong an attention to innovation as a key source of a protest cycle draws suspicion of a retrospective account. This leads to the second problem that concerns innovation: Rather than explaining how innovations occur and how such innovations are integrated into broader cycles of protest, the current scholarship treats innovation as a contingent event relevant only in relation to the protest cycle it sparks. Innovation is a contingent event because it is exogenous to explanation: It is not explained and is brought in only to explain the protest cycle it helps create. In this sense, it serves as a critical event or turning point (Abbott 1997; Mahoney 2000; Pierson 2000) that locks in the key characteristics that define a protest cycle. This approach inadvertently generates gaps in our understanding of the movement process: It doesn't help us understand how innovations occur in the first place, and leaves the mechanisms and processes that lead to innovation unexplained. In addition, we know little about why some innovations become successful while others remain buried. Lastly, it leads many researchers to overlook innovations that might occur in times other than the initial phase of a protest cycle, including times of movement crisis.

Like crisis, we lack a clear definition of innovation. McAdam (1999) defines innovative collective action as "action that departs from previous collective routines," and adds that it is "apt to develop when shared perceptions of threat or opportunity come to be tied to the established—which is not to say, formal—organizational vehicles and routine collective identities necessary to act on them" (p. xxvi). Introduction of newness has always been at the heart of the definition, but we will need more, especially when innovation in collective action carries strong connotation for greater effectiveness. Hence I will take innovation to mean introduction of new elements in social movement organization, tactics, and frames that leads to greater effectiveness of collective action. Given that political challengers always face constraints in the political environment, successful mobilization requires overcoming the barriers imposed by the political, social, and cultural institutions. Accordingly, my use of innovation highlights the aspect of how introduction of new tools and new models of action help challengers better cope with the varying degrees of constraints they face. This definition will allow us to consider innovation across a broad spectrum of circumstances, from highly favorable to highly adverse.

In the study of labor movements, though, there have been attempts to investigate the conditions and processes of innovation that are not part of a protest cycle. For example, while examining what enabled the revitalization of union movements in the U.S., Kim Voss and Rachel Sherman (2000), identified three factors crucial for some trade unions

to shift their union strategies from servicing to organizing: 1) pressure for innovation in the form of crisis perception; 2) new leadership that brings in new interpretations and strategies; and 3) support and pressure from trade union federations toward change. More recently, Lowell Turner (2009), in investigating two local unions' innovation process in Germany, have similarly underscored the role of new union leadership in interpreting a situation as crisis and making strategic choices and support from regional and national union federations. One addition in Turner's study was the idea of "untapped institutional possibility," that is, channels and resources within institutions that haven't been used for organizing purposes previously (p. 301). In a way, it reminds readers of the mechanism of appropriation in which political challengers seize existing sites for mobilizing purposes.

Findings from the study on innovation in the labor movement echo the findings from organizational studies on innovation well. Neil Fligstein (1991), in tracing the sources that led to the diversification of American industries, argues that under shock conditions there are three mechanisms that facilitates transformation in industrial practices: 1) new perception of the crisis situation; 2) organizations that come into existence with new strategies; and 3) diffusion of new strategies in the organizational field, as they are perceived as success. Similarly, in a study based on an extensive review of the literature on organizational decline and innovation, Mark Mone and his collaborators (1998) also came up with findings in line with the previous discussions. In addition to the aspects of organizational inertia, i.e., the degree of rigidity in terms of organizational mission/goal and power structure, the authors identified the availability of "uncommitted resource," the resources available to fund new organizational initiatives, and a set of interpretive mechanisms, i.e., perception that the crisis is real and controllable, as key moderators in the link between organizational decline and innovation.

The above studies on innovation reveal a number convergence points: First, innovations may occur by accident, but may also come as a result of conscious effort to overcome a crisis situation. In the process, the perception of crisis as such and the pursuit of new strategies can be identified as critical elements that often initiate innovation. Second, actors who are likely to seek change in a crisis situation don't emerge randomly. Rather, the veterans who had accumulated experiences across a number of movements (in the case of Voss and Sherman) or managers who can bring in new insights from their previous professional positions (in Fligstein's case) are more likely to be the key agents pushing forward new strategies. Third, the availability of untapped resources is important. This can take the form of tangible resources such as institutional or organizational channels or funding sources that can be exploited, but can also take the form of potential models of organization, tactics, and frames in other fields that are readily available for specific movement purposes. Lastly, innovations don't emerge successful by internal agents alone but are assisted by external opportunities. Studies on the labor movement have highlighted federal-level unions, but other aspects of the political opportunity that favor some movement forms over others may also be crucial.

Let me now discuss these aspects in more detail in relation to social movement crisis and innovation.

Outcomes of Crisis

So far I have discussed how our understanding of social movement crisis has been driven by theories that prioritize structural processes that take actors' responses relatively constant. As a result, a common image we conjure up when it comes to social movement in crisis is that of demobilization. This approach, however, has not gone unchallenged. A group of researchers specializing in American social movements have argued that social movements don't necessarily die out in the face of crisis and, in doing so, went beyond the cycle-centered approach of the mainstream paradigm and proposed useful concepts.

Verta Taylor's (1989) concept of movement in abeyance is one such example. Defined as "a holding process by which movements sustain themselves in nonreceptive political environments" that "provide continuity from one stage of mobilization to another" (p. 761), abeyance structure underscores how social movements can endure hard times by maintaining the personal networks, activist culture, and collective identity. Similar claims have been made, and the analytic focus has been on the persistence of movement organization and collective identity: Contrary to Piven and Cloward's (1979) claim that formalization of a social movement defuses the power of movement, Suzanne Staggenborg (1988) contended that formalization served a function of allowing social movements to weather hard times and maintain its core. Focusing on the feminist movement in the U.S., Staggenborg and Taylor (2005) more recently argued that organizational maintenance, institutionalization, and spread of movement culture, identity, and repertoire are evidence supporting the idea that the women's movement hasn't died out but continue to thrive.

David Meyer and Nancy Whittier's (1994) concept of social movement spillover is also useful in that it adopts a similar approach while looking at a different process. While the above-mentioned authors look at how a single movement could persist through unfavorable political environments, Meyer and Whittier try to understand how social movements can affect the contours of other movements across different cycles and in response to changing opportunities: "The ideas, tactics, style, participants, and organizations of one movement often spill over its boundaries to affect other social movements" (p. 277).

The usefulness of these concepts lies in how they allow us to think about the alternative trajectories of social movements once they hit a crisis. Rather than collapsing, they rightly point out that movements can persist. They also point out rightly that the activist networks, both formal and informal, can endure into the post-crisis situation. However, these works do not really tell much about innovation. The story is that of a movement

going into hibernation awaiting favorable political opportunities (abeyance), or of a group of activists participating in a new social movement campaign after a previous one saw a decline (spillover). The main focus is on continuity, whereas innovation is about change. There is little account of how activists perceive movement crisis and how they respond to it once they do. It is as if activists just maintain their connections and identities without seeking new strategies. In short, these accounts lack discussions on how activists perceive crises and the new strategies that may come as a result of it.

I think it is time to take into account actors' reaction to crisis more seriously. Crucial in this undertaking is a better understanding of how actors perceive the crisis situation and act accordingly. Intuitively, there are multiple ways in which they can perceive and respond to the changing circumstances. We have already discussed the three possible options activists may have in a crisis situation. They can either choose the exit option or the voice option. I have broken down the voice option into two: voice-status quo (voice without new strategy) and voice-innovation (voice with new strategy). The option taken by the activists that Taylor, Staggenborg, and Meyer and Whittier is that of voice-status quo. The activists in their account do not seek strategy change, or they change their strategy rather passively in response to the changing climate, e.g., discarding contentious tactics in favor of institutional ones (Staggenborg 1988). Radicalization described by Tarrow and McAdam may represent attempts at formulating new strategies. The only problem is that the attempts were unsuccessful. So far, I haven't spotted a study showing a case of successful innovation in a crisis situation, but I am inclined to bet on the possibility that there is.

But even if activists can come up with a new strategy, whether it is successful or not cannot be determined by the activists themselves. We need to see if the new strategy can ride the tide of changing opportunities. Even when activists fail to devise a new strategy, opening opportunities for another social movement campaign may facilitate what Meyer and Whittier called the social movement spillover. After all, an opportunity to one movement may be a constraint on another. When new opportunities are absent, the best we can expect is abeyance (the worse being movement demise). When new strategies are not met with new opportunities, the best activists can hope for is for their innovation to get picked up at a later time when opportunities are more favorable (recall how the bus boycotts and sit-ins were tried out before the civil rights movement cycle in McAdam 1983). We can think of new strategies leading to marginalization via radicalization (Tarrow 1989; McAdam 1999) as a case of new strategies going the opposite direction of the changing opportunities. On the other hand, when activists perceive the crisis situation as such and search for alternative strategies that are allowed to take advantage of changing political opportunity, we can think about the possibility of new strategies leading to innovation successfully.

My discussion is presented in the following table. Assuming that activist networks and organizations persist (Staggenborg 1988; Taylor 1989; Meyer and Whittier 1994), we can think of four conceptual spaces created by the intersection of how actors react to a

crisis situation (new strategy) and the political environment under which the reaction takes place (new opportunity). Each space represents possible outcomes to a crisis situation under the given conditions.

Table: Post-crisis Movement Outcome

New opportunity	O	spillover	innovation
	X	abeyance demise	latent innovation radicalization
		X	O
		New strategy	

Concluding Remarks, or Remaining Questions

Coping with crisis is no other than coping with the pressures of change, and different actors will likely find different ways to cope with the crisis situation. I have proposed a tentative, speculative framework to help understand this process, but two variables by no means consume the entirety of the social movement process. Without doubt, there are so many factors that need to be taken into consideration. In this section, I raise a few more questions for further discussion instead of offering a definitive conclusion.

Social movement response to crisis: As long as we are talking about a social movement not in terms of a single, self-contained, and self-propelling entity, but in terms of complicated processes “that consist of bounded, contingent, interactive performances by multiple and changing actors” (Tilly 1998: 256), it sounds almost futile to discuss how social movements react to crises. It is more likely that, even within a social movement campaign, different actors will be making different interpretations and act accordingly. How should we think about movement response to crisis when we observe fragmented groups choosing different options? Instead of talking about a social movement’s response to crisis, then, it would be preferable to understand movement response by breaking down a movement into sub-groups and see how they interact with one another to generate a combined effect.

Old and new in the innovation process: The classical “bifurcated path” can be seen as one such example of looking into how sub-groups develop within a movement when it

encounters crisis, and it represents a case in which the distance between the two subgroups grows larger and larger. However, we can possibly think about an alternative case where two groups (for convenience's sake, let's assume that one group kept to its original strategies while the other came up with new ones) that initially took on different paths end up increasing interaction and mutual influence, thereby gradually moving toward the direction of convergence. If there were to be a case such as this, it is likely that innovation takes two steps: first, through the introduction of new strategies by one group; second, through the interaction and reciprocal influences between the two groups. The second innovation would likely be a watered-down version of the first innovation, but it is no less an innovation in that new strategies are developed out of the interplay between two different strategies. This suggests one mechanism through which innovation combines the old and the new.

Innovation—New movement or a renewed movement?: Even if we were to be successful in spotting a successful case of innovation amidst movement crisis, we will soon face a serious question of whether the outcome of innovation should be considered a new movement or a renewed movement. This, to me, seems important, because defining it as a renewed movement will allow us to talk about long-term movement trajectories (i.e., persistence of a movement more or less maintaining its organization, identity, tactics, targets, etc.), whereas defining it as a new movement will necessarily involve adopting a cyclic approach to social movements. One's answer will depend on how social movement is defined (see, for example, Staggenborg and Taylor 2005), but it also raises the question of how we are to define innovation in terms of its scope. Can we call small changes in strategies that lead to minor improvement in effectiveness innovation? Or are we talking about introduction of newness that significantly transforms the movement itself? If the latter, how do we differentiate innovation from change in general? Do all changes involve innovation? Finding answers to these questions seems to go beyond the scope of this essay. Nonetheless, they will guide us through further discussions, and hopefully we will get to know more about the links between crisis and innovation than we do now.

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