

## A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO COLLECTIVE ACTION: LOOKING FOR AGENCY IN SOCIAL-MOVEMENT CHOICES\*

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*In theories of social movements, the structural models of the last thirty years may have reached the limits of their utility. Future breakthroughs are likely to arise from attention to the microfoundations of political action. The study of strategic choices may be one fruitful new path of research, especially if sociologists can develop an approach to strategy that takes cultural and institutional contexts more seriously than game theory, which has long dominated the study of strategy. As a starting point, I present several strategic dilemmas that organizers and participants face, either explicitly as choices or implicitly as tradeoffs. These choices represent agency in contrast to the structure that has interested scholars for so long. By portraying strategic players as audiences for words and actions, they are also thoroughly cultural. If we can begin to explain the choices faced and the choices made, we will go a long way toward opening up the study of social movements to strategic factors mostly ignored in the dominant models. Viewed as causal mechanisms, choices may offer the microfoundations for rethinking social movement theory.*

Whatever is given is the condition of a future action, not its limit.  
—Beatriz Sarlo

For thirty years the study of social movements has been dominated by structural metaphors. Insurgents must find “cleavages” among elites; “windows” of opportunity must open for them; participants are recruited through “networks”; social movement organizations compete in a social movement “industry”; the right “frames” must be discovered to express cultural meanings. The field has reflected the structuralist assumptions and ambitions of much of the rest of sociology. An enormous amount of excellent scholarship has been carried out in this paradigm, known first as resource mobilization and later as political process (for a summary, see McAdam et al. 1996). At the same time, researchers have become increasingly aware, implicitly or explicitly, that a lot was missing from these models (Melucci 1996; Benford 1997; Jasper 1997; McAdam et al. 2001; Goodwin and Jasper 2003a, b).

If structure is one aspect of social life, agency is the other, and many scholars have searched for ways to incorporate agency into their descriptions and explanations. Some of

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\* Revised version of a paper presented at the 2002 ASA meetings, Chicago. Thanks to Jeff Goodwin, Charlie Kurzman, Sarah Maddison, David Meyer, Ann Mische, Kelly Moore, Francesca Polletta, Julie Stewart, and the members of the Contentious Politics Workshop at Columbia University (especially Emrah Goker and Cecelia Walsh-Russo) for comments on earlier drafts.

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those most reliant on structural imagery reject the label “structuralist,” as Kurzman (2003) points out. The term “political process” (replacing “political opportunity structures”) was intended to capture the open-ended nature of political conflict, but few researchers have taken the process metaphor seriously, relying instead on static models. “Game” theory uses a metaphor that seems inherently open-ended, but practitioners concentrate on structured incentives and outcomes while largely ignoring the actual play of the game. Culture has also seemed a way to get at agency and choice (Jasper 1997), but cultural meanings can be just as structured and constraining as resources and organizations are (Polletta 2003). Most recently, emotions seem to promise to get closer to the subjective experience of social actors (Chodorow 1999; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001, forthcoming), but they do not always provide a sufficient sense of conscious awareness. Agency remains elusive.

If agency means anything, it would seem to involve choices. Individuals and groups must initiate or pursue one flow of action rather than another, respond in one way to events rather than in others. Participants in social movements make many choices, but you would never know this from the scholarly literature. We know about the effects of certain kinds of strategic choices (Gamson 1975) and about the factors that structure the repertory available to protestors (Tilly 1978)—but not how they actually choose from within this repertoire (Jasper 1997: 234-240). Without examining the act of selecting and applying tactics, we cannot adequately explain the psychological, organizational, cultural, and structural factors that help explain these choices.<sup>1</sup> Even when students of social movements give a central place to strategic choices in their empirical accounts, they frequently insist in their theoretical reprises on the exclusive importance of structures (e.g. Meyer 1990; Smith 1996). This reflects the use of the term agency in social theory: it is the concept waved about when structural theorists are forced to recognize the limits of their models (e.g., Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1979). The hollow conceptualization that results, unenlivened by empirical research, has begun to give agency a bad name before we know much about it (Fuchs 2001).

I begin, after examining the existing literature on strategy in the following section, with an all-too-brief exposition of the basic elements of a strategic framework to collective action (for a fuller exposition, not restricted to social movements, see Jasper, forthcoming). Like others (McAdam et al. 2001), I view protestors as sets of players in fields of strategic contestation, along with many other types of players. Using this perspective, the remainder of the article presents several examples of strategic dilemmas players face in contentious politics (additional dilemmas are listed in the appendix). The list is inductively derived from empirical research, not deduced from the framework or from first principles.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The most strategic approach to social movements came in the first flowering of resource-mobilization theory, with Oberschall’s (1973) efforts to place movements in the broader context of conflict. With this frame, he could highlight the interaction between insurgents and their opponents, especially processes such as polarization. The mobilization of resources and formation of alliances are key strategic activities (Jenkins and Perrow 1977). Over time, however, these dynamic aspects tended to be suppressed in favor of more structural concerns with state capacities (Tilly 1978), insiders and outsiders to the polity (Gamson 1975), indigenous resources (Morris 1984), and eventually political opportunity structures (McAdam 1982). Thus Gamson’s (1975) book on strategy ignored how decisions were made in favor of the structural conditions that determined which strategies worked.

Although this structural paradigm was eventually dubbed “political process” theory, it paid surprisingly little attention to processes, which were largely determined by the structural positions of insurgents and defenders of the status quo (Goodwin and Jasper 2003a). Recently, three of the major architects of that tradition, which still dominates the study of social movements in the United States, have said exactly this, calling for a more dynamic

approach. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001: 42) describe the paradigm's "four major defects" as follows: "(1) It focuses on static, rather than dynamic relationships. (2) It works best when centered on individual social movements and less well for broader episodes of contention. (3) Its genesis in the relatively open politics of the American 1960s led to more emphasis on opportunities than on threats, more confidence in the expansion of organizational resources than on the organizational deficits that many challengers suffer. (4) It focused inordinately on the *origins* of contention rather than on its later phases." A properly strategic approach would address each of these lacunae.

Unfortunately, McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, perhaps still structuralist at heart, do not lead us far down this road. Rather than asking what the basic building blocks of strategic action might be, they smuggle in the same general theories by disguising them as mechanisms and processes. In doing so, they miss the point of a "mechanisms" approach, which is to work up from micro-level descriptions to broader macro-level results (e.g., Elster 1999; also Stinchcombe 1991). By not doing this, and making their mechanisms broad structural processes instead, they remain structuralist rather than strategic. Because they have no way to address processes of choice at the micro level, they cannot in the end develop an interactive, dynamic framework.

Culturally oriented scholars have done even less to address strategy. Although Snow et al. (1986) introduced frames as a fundamentally strategic aspect of recruitment, they are generally used in a static way as a cluster of meanings—as Benford (1997) complains. Collective identity is seen to aid a movement, but most scholars take its presence or absence as largely given, ignoring the work that goes into creating it (cf., Epstein 1991)—much less the work that opponents do to undermine it. Cultural sociologists devote considerable attention to the "social construction" of meanings, but less to the role of those meanings in strategic action. Although rejecting older contrasts of expressive versus instrumental action, they have yet to explore the ways that meanings permeate and shape all action, or the ways that these meanings are heavily affected by interaction with other players (although Gitlin [1980] examined interactions with the media).

The most prominent scholar to address agency in a systematic way, Alain Touraine (1981), has done so at an extremely abstract—one might say structural—level. The stakes of true social movements are nothing less than the control of "historicity," the direction of social change. Citizens and technocrats battle over exerting their own agency in this process. Touraine's is a powerful vision, but it tells us more about social structure and social change than about the operations of social movements or contentious politics. Indeed, his recent work (like his early research) concerns modernity more than contentious politics (1988, 1995, 2000). He carves out a theoretical place for the Subject and links it to social movements, but has less to say about what that Subject will do. In some ways, my aim is to provide a ground-level catalogue of this subjectivity.

Game theory is the only analytic tradition to address strategy directly and consistently—so much so that it is almost synonymous with strategy in most of the social sciences. It lays out the basics of any reasonable theory of strategic interaction: players, with a range of preferences and actions to choose among, arenas that determine what actions and interactions lead to which outcomes, and the outcomes themselves. Game theory has attended to choices and dilemmas, and several of the dilemmas I discuss below have their equivalents in game theory. But most of its so-called dilemmas are "social" dilemmas, a clash between what's good for the individual and for the group, rather than strategic dilemmas. Worse, the elegant spareness of game theory has led it to focus on a narrow set of games with clear endpoints and payoffs, as well as coherent, unified players capable of ordering their preferences. Most sociologists are interested in a broader range of cultural and institutional factors. The subject of strategy has been almost entirely colonized by game theory, but I hope to rescue it for a broader range of sociologists to study. (For a fuller assessment of the

strengths and weaknesses of game theory, see Jasper, forthcoming: chap. 3).<sup>2</sup>

In the most thorough application of rational-choice theory to social movements, Lichbach (1998) discusses a long list of solutions insurgents may use to overcome Olson's (1965) free rider problem. Although he has a tragic sense of their potential risks as well as benefits, Lichbach does not present them as tradeoffs or dilemmas. Like most social scientists, he prefers to believe that with enough empirical cases we might be able to specify conditions under which each choice is the best one. He avoids mathematical games, but retains some of the hope for determinacy that they reflect (i.e., "solutions" according to algorithms). I prefer to see unavoidable tradeoffs where he sees an incompleteness of theory. Even in his work, we do not see players making decisions.

Activists have been more attuned to strategy than scholars. Marxist revolutionaries, most prominently Lenin and Gramsci, have asked, "What is to be done?" Alinsky (1971) also tried to formulate general rules of strategy. Shaw (1996) is a recent contribution to this tradition. But the goals of activists are not those of scholars. Activists want definitive answers that can give confidence to their followers; they are not likely to acknowledge dilemmas to which there is more than one possible correct answer. Part of their business is to "know" the right answers and dismiss alternatives. From the less urgent perspective of historical scholarship, we can ask why they take the positions they do.

Recently, several scholars have recognized the influence of strategic choice on movement operations and outcomes. For instance, I argued (Jasper 1997) that strategy is a fundamental dimension of protest alongside physical resources, culture, and biography. Then Ganz (2000) showed that strategic choices were central to an explanation of the UFW's unionization of California agriculture—through a direct comparison with a classic structural account (Jenkins and Perrow 1977). But Ganz's main focus was on the origins of strategic innovation, not the larger issue of day-to-day choices made by movement actors. In addition, he retained a slight structural flavor by speaking about "strategic capacities" instead of strategies. Nonetheless, strategy appears as one of the sources for "rethinking" theories of social movements after the structural paradigm (Ganz 2003). If we can't identify agency, we can't observe the structures that limit it.

Structural, cultural, and game-theoretic approaches to political action have talked past one another for a long time (Lichbach and Seligman 2000), but I think that a strategic approach—properly understood—could help us synthesize them. We must recognize that structured arenas shape players, players' decisions, and the outcomes of interactions, but we cannot assume effects without looking at the choices made, the interactions, and the results. All strategic action is filtered through cultural understandings, but at the same time cultural meanings are used strategically to persuade audiences. We must recognize the full panoply of goals, meanings, and feelings players have, rather than reducing them to a mathematically tractable minimum.

Strategic choices are one component of the microfoundations of political action. We need to understand what happens at the microlevel of individuals and their interactions in order to evaluate and improve our theories at the macro level of movements, states, revolutions, and so on. A number of early efforts to define the microsocial in politics, notably those based on psychoanalysis, failed for a number of reasons (Jasper 2004), among them the tendency to leap metaphorically from the micro to the macro rather than building up to it step by step. Today, the primary tradition that links the two is that of rational choice and game theories. Those of us who are skeptical of this approach—whether for its concern for mathematical elegance or its assumptions about human nature—need an alternative image of individual actions if we are to resist it successfully. All too often, images of maximization, exchange, and self-interest creep into our models in the absence of any clear alternative (even Melucci 1996).

The logic of dilemmas is alien to most social science, which favors determinacy. But there are real choices in social life, and no social scientist can predict what will be decided in

every case. Sometimes, we can guess well, but some choices are true dilemmas. This is not just true of social movements. Strategic dilemmas face a number of actors, possibly anyone who interacts with others with a goal in mind. McAdam et al. (2001) tried to expand the study of movements into that of contentious politics by including revolutions and institutional politics, but a true strategic approach would go even further. For the moment, though, I follow them in pushing beyond the singular attention that has been given to “social movements” as players, which has so often resulted in ignoring those with whom movements interact.

### A SOCIAL APPROACH TO STRATEGY

Strategic choices are made within a complex set of cultural and institutional contexts that shape the players themselves, the options perceived, the choices made from among them, and the outcomes. I would like to mention the main entities we find in these strategic fields.

There are *simple players* (individuals) and *complex players* (a.k.a. teams: groups, organizations, networks, and other aggregations of individuals). Each player may also have allies. There will always be some ways in which alliances act and decide as unified actors and ways in which they do not. The same is true of complex players. Individuals and internal factions are always capable of defecting from the team in a range of ways that vary in degrees of secrecy or openness. At times sub-units will act as part of the whole, at other times they will not. (Game theory demonstrates this issue well.) An individual may have loyalties to several entities at the same time, in addition to her individual concerns.

Every player will have many *goals* jostling for attention, each more or less explicitly recognized. Even simple players have goals (usually termed motivations) of which they are unaware, in addition to their conscious ones. These cannot easily be compared or rank-ordered, in part because the salience of each changes according to circumstances. To make matters more complex, that salience depends partly on the strategic games meant to attain them: a goal may become more salient as the chance of attaining it seems to increase (or fade in adverse circumstances). The goals of complex players are especially unstable, as individuals and factions battle to substitute their own favored goals (which may be either selfish or altruistic) for those of the team. Most actions are taken to address a number of noncomparable goals at the same time (contrary to game theory).

A strategic approach treats protest groups and other players symmetrically, instead of reducing the latter to the “environment” of the former—a structural trick that reduces the agency of all players except protestors. All players confront dilemmas, make choices, react to others, and so on. We can only understand contention when we pay equal attention to all of them. This hardly means that players are equal (protestors lack the resources of states, for instance), but they inhabit the same universe and must all make choices.

*Arenas* are sets of resources and rules that channel contention into certain kinds of actions and offer rewards and outcomes. They may be formal and legal at one extreme or informal at the other, relying on traditions and reputations. Protestors may launch action within a certain arena (the media or courts, for instance), but they also think about other possible arenas for future contestation. They ask themselves what new arenas their opponents can force them into, and what resources and skills they and other players control for maneuvering in those arenas. Switching arenas is a common way to surprise opponents, avoid defeats, and increase the value of the skills and resources you control. An outcome in one arena is sometimes only a starting point for action in another.

Every player brings certain *resources and skills* to each arena. Some of these, like money, are easily transferred across arenas, while others, such as specialized skills, are not. Tear gas is useful for street battles, not lawsuits. I define resources as physical capacities, especially technologies, and the money it takes to acquire them (Jasper 1997: chap. 3). Players normally seek arenas where their resources and skills are comparatively valuable. Official

*positions* in arenas are also useful, because they bring control of resources and allow their holders to make certain moves. The distinction between a person and a position she holds generates a number of strategic dilemmas. The distribution of all these advantages changes, or can change, during (and as a result of) strategic engagement.

Each player is an *audience* for the statements, symbols, and actions of other players. This means that all strategic action is interpreted culturally and psychologically. Except in the most private of settings (and even there sometimes, thanks to spies and to individual differences), there will be diverse audiences for each word and action. Protestors (like all players) will want to have different effects on different audiences, crafting and promulgating different messages for each to the extent possible. (Admittedly, the effects of some actions go beyond the perceptions of audiences, for instance by forcing other players to act in a certain way or preventing them from doing so. In this extreme case, physical coercion—being arrested or shot—replaces persuasion.) Protestors ask who the audiences will be, and what the cognitive, emotional, and practical effects will be on each, for each action. Statements and images are like other actions in this regard.

This is a broadly cultural and especially rhetorical approach, in which the words and actions of activists are aimed at producing effects in a number of audiences (Jasper 2001). This is the reason that game and theater metaphors intermingle so thoroughly in the work of sociology's preeminent scholar of strategy, Erving Goffman (1959 1974). The desired effects may be emotions, understandings, moral sensibilities, and/or actions. Emotions, often overlooked, permeate all stages of strategic action, including initial engagement, the formulation of goals, the loyalties of social networks, the choices made, sacrifices accepted, and outcomes (Jasper 1998; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001, forthcoming). The audiences may be internal as well as external to the movement. The former may include grassroots followers, specific factions of members, influential individuals, or rivals for office and control. People can even do or say things with themselves as the primary audience (to buck up their courage, for instance). External audiences include potential recruits and allies, the media, bystanders, rivals, opponents, philanthropies, and various units of the state (police, military, courts, regulators, elected officials, and so on). Most words, images, and actions reach several audiences at the same time, creating a number of dilemmas.

Lest the reader be confused by the vocabulary of choices and players, let me insist that this approach differs substantially from rational choice models. I do not believe in any kind of "rationality" independent of cultural and institutional contexts—and think that the entire question of rational versus irrational action is in all likelihood a waste of time. (The only true irrationality is probably the inability to learn from experience.) I do not think we can possibly model strategic choices with mathematical equations. Even the most culturally saturated group or individual makes choices, carries out strategies, anticipates the reactions of others, and has some sense of what it would mean to "win." All of their intentions, understandings, and actions are filtered through cultural and psychological lenses.

In what follows I present examples of choices that participants, and especially leaders, in social movements may face. They need not face all of them, at least explicitly. Some will be hard choices, others will be so easy that they do not feel like choices at all. I present them as dilemmas, but they will not always feel like that to protestors. Some may be invisible, underlying tradeoffs (when they are faced explicitly, they are choices and dilemmas; when left implicit, tradeoffs). Nor do all of them represent simple either-or alternatives. In some cases there are three or four general possibilities, in others a whole continuum of options. They are meant to show that there are different ways to engage in politics, that protestors are continually making decisions. We tend to overlook these choices because we have been trained instead to see deterministic structures that eliminate choice. But anyone who has sat through the endless meetings of a typical protest group knows how many decisions are made, and how much attention, disagreement, and struggle they entail. I believe that these choices must be the explananda for any theory of social movement strategy.

If we emphasize strategic choice, we must be careful to specify who exactly is making which decisions. Movements and groups vary enormously in this. There is usually negotiation and persuasion, even when a single individual is ultimately decisive (Jasper 2003). Sometimes roomfuls of people, other times large meetings, even occasionally outsiders, may arrive at decisions. There is likely to be conflict over many choices, and we need to document the process by which various options are whittled down to one. The “unit of analysis” in this research must comprise both individuals and organizations.<sup>3</sup>

Humans develop institutions and culture, mainstream theorists would reply, so that we do not have to face so many choices all the time. We produce traditions, values, and habitus so that we can act without thinking very much about it (Douglas 1986). I agree. Many of our choices are made for us by our social context, woven into our institutions (White 1992). This is the structuralist insight. And yet, one of the most important moments, and source of creativity, is when strategic players manage to break with expectations and make another choice, taking their opponents by surprise. This is how structures change, after all. Even when players themselves forget they have choices, we observers (and sometimes advisors) should not. Structures are only important because they shape our choices. We can never delineate structure or agency in isolation from the other.

I turn now to some basic dilemmas. A much larger number are listed in the appendix.

### EXAMPLES OF STRATEGIC CHOICES

*The Organization Dilemma.* One of the most debated issues in movement research is the extent to which formal bureaucratization helps or hurts movements. Gamson (1975) found that groups were more likely to win if they had well-organized structures, while in Piven and Cloward’s (1977) cases this led groups to give up important goals as well as their most powerful tactic, disruption. In addition to formalization, organizations also face issues of centralization versus decentralization: control from the center or autonomy for the periphery. The more hierarchic a protest group becomes, the less it provides the pleasures of grassroots involvement, but the more effective it may be in getting the attention of legislators and the media. Centralized organizations may be able to act in a more coordinated fashion, but at the cost of cutting grassroots members out of decision making.

As part of the organization dilemma, you must decide whether to organize your team around monetary incentives or affective ones. Most protest groups are based on volunteer labor, but the larger they grow the more they may need permanent, paid staff (McCarthy and Zald 1973). This change introduces a new kind of incentive and is rarely without controversy. If the staff themselves found the organization, it may never be able to attract much grassroots activism. If a group relies exclusively on volunteers, on the other hand, it may need to take extreme ideological stands that make it less persuasive to authorities and bystander audiences (Mansbridge 1986). Monetary incentives may be rejected as polluting—especially when an organization grows large and wealthy. Staff may provide needed expertise, however, available only by paying them. Experts may also help make organizations more efficient (Staggenborg 1988). To muddy the picture, though, love can often be bought: paid canvasers can be used to elicit grassroots support.<sup>4</sup>

*The Extension Dilemma.* The further you expand your group (or alliance), the less coherent your goals and actions can be. Normally, fewer people will be willing to bear high risks and costs, so expansion limits your range of activities (cf. Finke and Stark 1992, who suggest that religious groups may be different). Furthermore, as potential power or reach increases, so do coordination problems. To some extent, this is a problem of sheer size. But it also has to do with the diversity of people involved. Environmentalists and unionists may need each other for certain issues, for example, but on others their interests diverge (Rose 2000). Another threat is that a new umbrella organization that will become a rival. Kleidman

(1993: 184), studying coalitions in the peace movement, observes that “the combined groups concentrated their forces at a key moment, bringing to the movement new attention and, during the antinuclear campaigns, new resources.” But disagreements and rivalries among member organizations prevented any of the coalitions from lasting longer than three years. If the new alliance attracts its own resources, he further comments, this mitigates the rivalries.

Part of the extension dilemma arises from the benefits of maintaining a sharp collective identity: the broader the definition of that identity, the less specific it can be. In the U.S. movement for peace in Central America in the 1980s, some religious groups became more secular, while others felt their moral voice was stronger if they remained (in one case) a “prayerful, biblically based community” (Smith 1996: 22). Coalitions may exacerbate internal tensions in exchange for external strength. This is a classic dilemma for revolutionaries, and Marxists have long grappled with it. Working-class revolutionaries tend to succeed when they build broad coalitions based only on what they all oppose—the old regime—so that various groups can work together, but after the revolution they have less influence on the new regime (Goldstone 1991; Goodwin 2001)

Part of the extension dilemma is whether your membership will be restricted or open. Does your power lie in sheer numbers of members, no matter who they are, or in the kind of people they are? You may wish to restrict your mobilization to those with special resources, skills, or reputations, to increase your effectiveness. You may wish to exclude those especially stigmatized by other audiences (women’s movements tried to discourage or hide lesbians; gay-rights movements have done the same to transvestites or man-boy love proponents). On the other hand, sheer numbers may be the source of a movement’s power, for instance when its objective is disruption or voting influence. Plus, the very stigma that undermines the group in the eyes of outsiders may be an important source of solidarity for your group (Gamson 1995; Minow 1980). In social hierarchies, this is a choice between reaching up or reaching down. It has been a recurrent dilemma for labor movements, which have had to decide whether to organize the unskilled throughout an industry (or an economy) or to organize skilled workers who identify more with management. Skilled craft workers, often dubbed labor aristocrats, were especially torn “between craft and class,” as Haydu (1988) puts it. The Knights of Labor, for example, did a good job of persuading skilled craftsmen to reach down, but they were less successful when they attempted to reach up to small businessmen—a failure that helped seal their fate (Voss 1993).

In an acute form of the extension dilemma, powerful allies offer power and attention, but they may subordinate your goals to theirs. Celebrities are one example (Meyer and Gamson 1995); “linking organizations,” which bring small groups into their federation, are another (Gordon and Jasper 1996). Experts can also be analyzed as a form of powerful ally who may subordinate your way of thinking and talking to their own. In showing how politicians publicized and yet distorted the message of the nuclear freeze in the early 1980s, Meyer (1990: 221ff) referred to their “smothering embrace”; powerful allies watered down the freeze message. Senator Ted Kennedy “deliberately wrote his freeze proposal in vague language to attract moderate support, perhaps considering the right wing of the Democratic Party” (224-5). Powerful allies usually consist of political or economic elites, who in turn usually demand some moderation in movement demands and tactics.

Powerful financial backers get to call some of the shots—or at least cannot be altogether ignored. If beneficiaries and funders differ, a protest group must balance these two audiences (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Unions can afford to support full-time organizers, for instance, but these rarely succeed unless they can link up with local members of the aggrieved work force (Ganz 2000; Bronfenbrenner et al. 1998).

*Shifting Goals.* Do you stick with your original goals, trying to find the right means, or do you adjust your goals to your abilities and opportunities? Movement groups often expand their goals if they are victorious, and trim them if they meet unexpected resistance. On April 17, 1989, for example, student protestors in Beijing organized a march that had an

unexpectedly high turnout, more than one hundred thousand. Police lines melted before it or were broken with no resistance. The main result, Calhoun (1994: 52) reports, was that “some students began clearly to speak to and for the whole Chinese people. They self-consciously sought to abandon special-interest concerns as students and intellectuals.” Success fueled ambition. Compromise, on the other hand, often allows limited victories at the cost of more sweeping ones. Such shifts are usually controversial, as movements can factionalize into pragmatists and hard-core believers, like the fundis and realos factions (fundamentalists and realists) of the German Greens during the 1980s. (On shifting goals in the Iranian Revolution, see Kurzman 2004)

*Naughty or Nice?* Do others do what you want them to because they love you or because they fear you? Do you ask politely for what you want, or do you disrupt things? Does violence work for protest groups, as Gans (1975) found? Your choice may depend on your capacity to disrupt economic and political normalcy as well as on what alternatives you can pursue. It may also depend on which audiences you are trying to please: bystanders usually dislike disruption, and agents of the state almost always do. Can you get what you want directly from your targets, before these other players become engaged? This is the essence of Piven and Cloward’s argument: breaking the rules is the only way for oppressed groups to get anything, as the rules were set up precisely to keep them down. Naughtiness follows the logic of coercion (or of war), niceness that of persuasion (of a debate). We might also call this the chaos dilemma: will you do better when things are predictable or when they are chaotic? The Bolsheviks are not the only ones to have taken advantage of chaos. When normal routines are to your disadvantage, there may be little to lose and a lot to gain from shaking things up.

In a version of *Naughty or Nice*, there are sometimes advantages to stealth, other times to publicizing what you are doing. Stealth gives you the advantage of surprise; publicity may gain you sympathy and recruits. Secrecy can backfire if you are caught at it, though. Exposed lies were the most devastating form of “blunder” analyzed by Jasper and Poulsen (1993) in their discussion of the interactions between protestors and their opponents. In a mild version of this, animal-rights activists were often accused of hiding their “real,” more sweeping intentions from the public, before whom they tried to appear moderate. (This is an issue of segregating audiences, a useful tactic if you can pull it off and send different messages to different players.) Apparent efforts to deceive may arise from either ineptitude (poor communication skills) or arrogance (a feeling that others should accept what you do without demanding explanations). Some groups have little choice between stealth and publicity, as Scott (1985 1990) has shown: under conditions of extreme repression or surveillance, stealth is crucial to almost any form of resistance.

Sometimes it is advantageous to seem to know more than you do; other times, to know less. This is a variation of “*Naughty or Nice?*,” as you must choose to be either threatening (knowledgable) or unthreatening (ignorant). To some extent, the goal is to use the information you have at the right moment to surprise opponents. By waiting, you can hope to catch opponents in public lies, for instance, or hit them with an embarrassing revelation when media attention is already heavy for other reasons. In some cases, being ignorant can be presented as a moral virtue, for example when it is portrayed as a refusal to be embroiled in technical or scientific (“instrumental”) reasoning at the expense of moral virtue (Jasper and Poulsen 1995), or when “politics” is a dirty word (Eliasoph 1998).

*Form or Content.* It is often possible to switch attention and rhetoric from the content of your claim to the formal mechanisms for handling it, broadening your critique but at the same time possibly losing sight of the original issue. You may use “procedural rhetoric” rather than substantive rhetoric, for instance, either complaining about the mishandling of your complaints or about the procedures used to make the original decision (Gordon and Jasper 1996). A common American example is the lack of a proper environmental impact statement, used to stop or at least delay so many projects in court. Reliance on the media

raises a similar dilemma, as they tend to focus on form (what protestors do) rather than the content of protestors' messages. Speaking of the Nuclear Freeze movement's enormous demonstrations on June 12, 1982, Robert Spiegleman complained that the media's "unmodulated celebration of the rally's size and good behavior smothered and obliterated the urgency and terror that had brought so many together" (quoted in Meyer 1990: 130).

*Reaching out or Reaching in.* Some tactics and appeals are oriented toward those on your team, others to outsiders—two very different audiences. Mansbridge (1986: 178) described the tension between "reaching out and reaching in" in her analysis of the battle over the ERA: "To change the world, a movement must include as many people as possible. But to attract devoted activists, a movement must often promote a sense of exclusivity—'we few, we happy few, we band of brothers.'" Although this is partly an extension dilemma, there is the added issue of whether to play to inside or outside audiences once they are defined. Reaching in, Mansbridge points out, may require developing a sense of "us versus them," an emphasis on doctrinal purity, and some homogeneity of membership, exactly the things that isolate the group from outsiders. Bernstein (1997) found that gay and lesbian rights groups crafted different collective identities depending on whether they needed to cultivate allies or not (more accommodating images that denied difference, versus more radical ones that emphasized it). Unless a movement has material rewards to offer members and staff, it must rely on these symbolic and emotional rewards of solidarity. The tension does not concern only rank-and-file activists. Leaders and spokespersons, too, may be chosen because they are popular with the group, or because they interact well with those outside the group. (Meier and Rudwick [1973] document the NAACP's dilemma in the 1940s and 1950s over whether to use black or white lawyers.)

## DISCUSSION

Participants in social movements constantly face choices. It is in those choices that we see the cultural meanings, moral sentiments, emotions, and forms of rationality of groups and individuals. Attention to choice would force "process" and "game" theorists to take their metaphors seriously, and cultural theorists to specify concretely where they saw meanings and what effects those meanings had. We can't see the structures that constrain protestors unless we examine what they are trying to do. What's more, it is often strategic choices that make up the "events" which, according to many sociologists, should be the focus of complex historical explanations (Abbott 1992; Sewell 1996).

Different kinds of groups and movements will no doubt respond to these dilemmas with different patterns of choices. Middle-class mobilizations may rely on experts, resources, organization building, and long-run planning, for instance, while working-class movements may turn instead to disruptive, radical tactics that require fewer resources. Some groups may be especially inward-looking, for example religious movements concerned with saving members' souls or self-help movements aimed at advancing members in some other direction (although many inward-reaching movements hope for eventual external impacts). Some movements are intentionally short-run or ad hoc, while others try to sustain action indefinitely. Some movements are local, others national or international. Various choices accompany each of these foci. We need research into what choices cluster together.

These dilemmas are frequently transferred into conflicts, as different individuals or factions favor different choices. In fact these debates are a useful method for examining the dilemmas. Participants may disagree permanently, say, over the relative importance of different audiences, a disagreement that may surface in decision after decision and perhaps lead ultimately to schism. Or a decision may be more vital to one faction than another, raising for them issues of the movement's very identity.

Out of all the possible choices that players might make, only a minority are explicitly examined and debated. Social scientists have shown the importance of "non-choices" in

political life, the moments when powerful players or structural forces keep certain issues *off* the table (Bachrach and Baratz 1970; Lukes 1974). Most of this work shares the problem of all research on “false consciousness”: the more successful the powerful players, the less evidence there is of their activity. The only way we can show that issues are being suppressed is to find times when they were not suppressed—when open discussion leads to their removal at a later point. The debate may be behind closed doors rather than public, but *someone* is usually thinking about the potential choices. By identifying general choices available to players whether they explicitly face them or not, my approach should actually allow us to uncover the suppression more clearly. Why was a certain dilemma never discussed? Did no one think of it, due to cultural or psychological reasons? Or did powerful players within the team make the decision for everyone else?

In other words, the identification of widely shared tradeoffs allows comparisons across players that should help us understand how they operate, including how they refuse certain decisions. These “choice points” become something like Peter Winch’s “limiting notions,” those basic processes (birth, sex, death) around which all cultures spin webs of meaning. All groups must make implicit or explicit decisions about reaching out or in, about the degree of extension, degree of organization, and others. Strategic choices allow us to compare social movements more accurately, at a lot of different points.

This in turn suggests that my choice points are simply variables. Many of them have indeed been taken as variables in the past, such as the degree of formal organization (Gamson 1975). Most have not been, at least not yet. Movement research would be stronger with more comparative methods; most scholars devote so much energy to one case that they never move on to a second. With relatively clear dilemmas or potential choice points as variables, we might be able to study multiple movements. Then, we could begin to build midrange theory by showing why groups make different choices. Like all variables, strategic dilemmas give us points of comparison and explanation. They are good candidates for the mechanisms that McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly claim to seek.

Strategic choices could be the explananda for new kinds of explanations of mobilization and conflict. We need to ask what cultural, psychological, emotional, and structural factors influence which choices are consciously made instead of being left as implicit tradeoffs, as well as which choices are made in those dilemmas that are faced explicitly.<sup>5</sup> We need hypotheses about the causal mechanisms that lead to difference choices. Developing these will involve not only comparisons of movements and movement organizations, but examination of trends over time. Eventually, structural factors can take their place alongside others without any advance presumption that they are more important.

A full strategic analysis of a lengthy interaction among multiple players, with numerous decisions by each, would require vast research. Like all research methods, the ideal form is beyond our grasp. Short of omniscience, we might study a small number of key decisions in depth, or the interaction of several decisions taken on both sides of a social conflict. The kind of evidence needed for the study of decisions is especially suited to the methods already in use by many or most social-movement researchers: participant observation, depth interviews, ethnographic observation. These should provide the kind of nuanced understanding and information that explanations of strategy would require. (Historical cases, I admit, will be more of a challenge, depending on what kinds of records were kept.)

Each dilemma, I immodestly hope, is worthy of its own research project. I see four kinds of questions that could be asked about each, depending on whether they address the general dilemma or specific choices, and whether the dilemma/choice is taken as explanandum or explanans. One family of questions asks why each dilemma exists, how widespread is its scope, and the nature of the dilemma. This is the most structural of the questions. What factors relevant to psychology, information, organizations, and so on, lead to

this tradeoff? And is the tradeoff a strict either/or? Or does a little more of one benefit lead to a little less of another? Does it arise because there are distinct audiences pleased by conflicting actions? Or does the dilemma reflect competing goals? Or tension between means and goals? Also, is it possible ever to get the balance right, to get the benefits of both horns of the dilemma? Finally, what circumstances make the dilemma more urgent or more conscious?

A second approach is to try to explain the choices made by players facing a dilemma. What psychological or organizational or other factors lead to one choice rather than the other? What factors lead to biases in favor of one choice again and again, perhaps more often than an observer would judge to be optimal? At the extreme, a choice fades from conscious considerations into rule or routine (this is a more structural account).

A third set of questions examines the effects of the existence of a given dilemma. What technologies, practices, organizational structures, and so on have been invented to resolve the dilemma, to clarify it, or to render it useful? What information is gathered, alliances formed, promises made to deal with dilemmas? What rhetorical patches have been constructed to hide or resolve the dilemma?

Finally, what are the effects of particular choices? Here, the choices become causal mechanisms which concatenate into concrete explanations. How is the player affected by the choice? How do other players react? Are arenas, players, symbols, or rules changed? Who is mobilized? Do resources or positions change hands? Who gets more of what they want? An action by one player leads others to react, and on and on. These are the kinds of questions we would normally turn to strategic approaches to answer.

## CONCLUSIONS

We need a sociology of strategic choice that pays more attention to meaning and to social and institutional context than game theory does. It is time to take social movements seriously as agents, as well as to recognize the role of individual agents within social movements—as leaders, decision makers, spies, potential defectors (Jasper 2003). We also need research into strategic choice in a range of contexts; the choices leaders make in recruiting others, those of individuals in deciding whether to attend an event, the choices of opponents faced with protest, the decisions made in the heat of a confrontation, those to change tactics or ideologies. When we look for decisions and dilemmas (instead of for structures), we will find them. This research agenda plays to the methodological strengths of this field.

Not all action is strategic. Most of what we do is routine or communicative, rather than directed to the means for getting what we want from others. Within social movements, there are a number of routine activities that are not questioned—but many of them could be. Almost every action of a protest group reflects an explicit or implicit choice: it could have been done differently. But they are not of equal consequence. What color to paint the office is a choice, but not (most of the time) a *strategic* choice. Whether to have a march on Saturday or Sunday is a strategic choice, but probably not a consequential one (beyond the obvious effort to allow larger crowds, perhaps to find symbolic days to heighten emotions). In the text and appendix, I have tried to identify choices most likely to have an impact on the strategic interactions of movement groups. Only when we compare choices across groups will we know this for sure.

Strategic dilemmas, finally, are not restricted to social movements. What I have said of social movement groups applies equally to their opponents, state agents, and other players, who face the same dilemmas. Dilemmas are also the very stuff of international relations, industrial relations, and politics. I would go further (and do in Jasper, forthcoming): any social interaction, among individuals or organizations or collectivities, in which there is a potential clash of wills, will be characterized by tradeoffs and choices of the kind examined here. Whether it is the interaction between teachers and students, spouses (Vaughan 1986), children and parents, employees in an organization (Jackall 1988), or businesses in a market (Fligstein

2001), strategic dilemmas and choices appear regularly if not always explicitly. The time has come for sociologists to develop a social model of strategy to compensate for the weaknesses (and imperialism) of game theory's individualistic and economic models, on the one hand, and structural sociology's blindness to agency and action, on the other. Social movements are an obvious field for beginning this kind of bottom-up theorizing.

#### APPENDIX: ADDITIONAL DILEMMAS

1. *The Dilemma of Inevitability*: An ideology that suggests you must eventually win offers confidence but makes collective action less critical.
2. *The Band-of-Brothers Dilemma*: Affective loyalties to the broader group are essential, but there is a risk they will come to rest on only a single fellow member or a handful at the expense of the larger collectivity.
3. *Leadership Distance*: Will a leader be more appealing if lofty and unique, a kind of superhuman saint, or if a regular type, one of the guys?
4. *The Ambitious Leader* (a twist on the extension dilemma): We want strong and competent leaders, but if they are too ambitious they may substitute their own goals for those of the group.
5. *Direct or Indirect Moves?* Attention can be devoted to direct confrontations with opponents, or to indirect moves such as persuading third parties, gathering resources, building networks, and so on.
6. *Plan versus Opportunity*: You can plan initiatives of your own, or you can watch and wait for opponents to make mistakes.
7. *The Basket Dilemma*: Do you aim for one decisive engagement, winner-take-all, or do you spread your risk over many smaller engagements?
8. *The Dilemma of False Arenas*: Representation in certain arenas, for instance blue-ribbon commissions, may take a lot of time without advancing your cause.
9. *The Dilemma of Cultural Innovation*: To appeal to your various audiences you must use the meanings they already hold, and pushing too far may cause you to lose them.
10. *Victim or Hero?* Do you portray yourself as wronged victim in need of help or as strong, avenging hero?
11. *Villain or Clown?* Do you portray opponents as strong and dangerous or as silly and contemptible?
12. *The Engagement Dilemma*: Moving from latency and community into active engagement and visibility brings a number of risks, such as external repression or misrepresentation and internal conflicts over strategy.
13. *Dirty Hands*: Some goals are only—or more easily—attained through unsavory means.
14. *Money's Curse*: Money is often seen as dirtying your hands, yet even organizations that are “above” such mundane issues nonetheless depend on financial resources.
15. *The Radical-Flank Dilemma*: Extreme words and actions get attention, and often take opponents by surprise, but they usually play poorly with bystanders and authorities.
16. *The Media Dilemma*: New media can get your message to broad audiences but—like all powerful allies—they are likely to distort it in doing so.
17. *The Bridge-Builder's Dilemma*: Individuals who can mediate between groups, or different sides in a conflict, often lose the trust of their own groups by doing so—caught on the horns of Reaching Out or Reaching In.
18. *The Familiar and the New*: New tactics surprise opponents and authorities, but it is typically hard for your own group to pull them off.
19. *Segregating Audiences*: You would like to send different messages to different players, especially internal versus external ones, but spillover across the boundaries can be used to make you look duplicitous.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>I find the distinction between strategy and tactics misleading. In military tradition, strategy consisted of the decisions made by a general (a *stratégos*), while lower officers implemented them through tactics. But all are making strategic decisions, in the sense of pursuing goals in relationship to other players who may resist.

<sup>2</sup>A wave of research in behavioral economics is currently testing many of game theory's assumptions, with mixed results (for a summary see Camerer 2003). Almost all of it deals with individual decision makers, however, not composite entities.

<sup>3</sup>A sound strategic approach must incorporate both simple and complex players, but contrary to game theory the two are not formally equivalent, as the latter include the former. We must attend to control and coordination and other strategic processes out of which complex players derive decisions.

<sup>4</sup>In classic typologies of organizational incentives (e.g. Etzioni 1961, or Clark and Wilson 1961), there are also "purposive" incentives having to do with the satisfactions deriving from the goals of the group. For social movements, I think we can assume that purposive incentives will be present whether there are affective or material ones too: purposive incentives seem to define this kind of organization.

<sup>5</sup>Strategic choices are only one of the microfoundations we need, and they are thoroughly affected by others. These include bodily urges, cognition and memory, sources of rhetorical resonance such as those involved in framing, affective connections to the world, moral principles and intuitions, moods like depression and cynicism, and reflex emotions such as anger or surprise (on emotional microfoundations, see Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, forthcoming). From these we can begin to understand more macro factors such as rules, resources, organizations, and public embodiments of cultural meanings.

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