Revisiting the U.S. Civil Rights Movement:
Toward a More Synthetic Understanding
of the Origins of Contention

by
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Revisiting the U.S. Civil Rights Movement:

Toward a More Synthetic Understanding of the Origins of Contention[1]

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My motivations for writing *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency* were varied. My principal goals were pragmatic. I wanted to complete the thesis and obtain my Ph.D. in hope that some misguided institution would actually offer me gainful employment. But there were two important intellectual goals at work as well. Believing, as I still do, that the modern civil rights movement marked a critical watershed in the history of the United States, I wanted to understand as much about the historical origins of that struggle as I could. Second, I hoped to use the case of the civil rights movement to fashion a more general theory of social movement emergence. Nearly a quarter of century after beginning work on my dissertation, I retain a great deal of interest in and enthusiasm for these two intellectual goals. This Introduction allows me to revisit both goals, with an eye to amending my understanding of the case and to teasing out the theoretical implications that derive from that amendment. It always surprises me to see authors defending every nuance of works they have written. I have always understood my work–even the pieces of which I am most proud–to be woefully stylized approximations to a much more complicated empirical reality. I therefore embrace an opportunity that few authors ever get: to revisit their work in light of new scholarship in hope of edging a bit closer to the complexities of the phenomenon in question.

In addition to the two goals which animated the original book, there is a third motivation for writing this Introduction, one inspired by more recent intellectual trends in sociology and the social sciences more generally. This newer aim involves a desire to explore the possibilities for theoretical synthesis across nominally distinct structuralist, culturalist, and rationalist approaches to the study of collective action. These theoretical perspectives have become increasingly distinct and antagonistic in recent years within sociology (c.f. Goodwin and Jasper, 1998; Kiser and Hechter, 1998; Somers, 1997). Thus beside my desire to use an amended understanding of the civil rights movement to fashion a more satisfactory theory of social movement origins, my more general aim is to see whether these perspectives can be reconciled to any significant degree.

Paradigm warfare only makes sense under one of two assumptions. One can either assume that truth is synonymous with a given theoretical perspective or, more pragmatically, that the best way to understand the complexity of social life is by fashioning highly stylized "baseline" models as a first approximation to reality. I have long been skeptical of the first assumption, taking it as a given that all theories suppress features of social life, even as they highlight others.

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Though I suspect many proponents of this or that theory actually retain a great deal of ontological faith in "their" perspective, when pressed most retreat to the second line of defense as a way of justifying their adherence to a given theory. The justification is straightforward and entirely credible: let each theoretical perspective develop more or less autonomously to see just how far the inherent logic and distinctive set of assumptions underlying the perspective can take it.

But it seems just as valid to chart a more synthetic course and to ask how, in this case, insights from structuralist, rationalist and culturalist perspectives might be combined to yield a fuller understanding of social movement dynamics. That is the tack I will take in this Introduction. However, to keep the enterprise manageable, I will bound it in an important way. Rather than take on the full temporal sweep of a movement, I will focus only on the origins of same. I will proceed as follows: Taking the dominant structural model of social movement emergence as my starting point, I offer a thoroughgoing critique of this account, seeking to underscore how the failure to integrate insights from other proximate fields and from culturalist and rationalist perspectives has seriously truncated our understanding of the phenomenon in question. Drawing on this critique, I then offer an alternative account of movement emergence. Throughout the explication of this alternative perspective, I seek to illustrate the claims I am making by reference to the single case in question: the American civil rights movement of the post-World War II period.

**The Question of Origins: Reviewing the Literature**

A fairly strong consensus has emerged in recent years among scholars of social movements with respect to the question of movement emergence. Increasingly, one finds scholars from various countries and nominally different theoretical traditions emphasizing the importance of the same three broad sets of factors in analyzing the origins of collective action. These three factors are: 1) the political opportunities and constraints confronting a given challenger; 2) the forms of organization (informal as well as formal) available to insurgents as sites for initial mobilization, and; 3) the collective processes of interpretation, attribution and social construction that mediate between opportunity and action. Or perhaps it will be easier to refer to these three factors by their conventional shorthand designations: *political opportunities, mobilizing*

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*structures, and framing processes.*

1. <u>Expanding Political Opportunities</u> - Under ordinary circumstances, excluded groups or challengers, face enormous obstacles in their efforts to advance group interests. Challengers are excluded from routine decision-making processes precisely because their bargaining position, relative to established polity members, is so weak. But the particular set of power relations that define the political environment at any point in time hardly constitute an immutable structure of political life. Instead, the opportunities for a challenger to engage in successful collective action are expected to vary over time. And it is these variations that are held to help shape the ebb and flow of movement activity.

But what accounts for these shifts in political opportunity? A finite list of specific causes would be impossible to compile. The point is *any* broad social change process that serves to significantly undermine the calculations and assumptions on which the political establishment is structured is very likely to occasion a significant expansion in political opportunity. Among the events and processes likely to prove disruptive of the political status quo are wars, industrialization, international political realignments or concerted political pressure from international actors, economic crisis, and widespread demographic shifts.

2. <u>Extant Mobilizing Structures</u> - If changes in the institutionalized political system shape the prospects for collective action, their influence is not independent of the various kinds of *mobilizing structures* through which groups seek to organize and press their claims. By mobilizing structures we mean *those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action.* This focus on the meso-level groups, organizations, and informal networks that comprise the collective building blocks of social movements constitutes the second conceptual element in this synthesis of the current consensus that appears to exist among those who have studied the question of movement emergence. The shared assumption is that changes in a system of institutionalized politics only affords a potential challenger the opportunity for successful collective action. It is the organizational vehicles available to the group at the time the opportunity presents itself that conditions its ability to exploit these new resources. In the absence of such vehicles, the group is apt to lack the capacity

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to act even when afforded the opportunity to do so.

3. <u>Framing or other Interpretive Processes</u> - If a combination of political opportunities and mobilizing structures affords the group a certain structural potential for action, they remain, in the absence of one final factor, insufficient to account for collective action. Mediating between opportunity, organization and action are the shared meanings, and cultural understandings– including a shared collective identity–that people bring to an instance of incipient contention. At a minimum people need to feel both *aggrieved* about some aspect of their lives and *optimistic* that, acting collectively, they can redress the problem. The affective and cognitive come together to shape these two perceptions. The relevant mobilizing emotions are anger at the perceived injustice and hope that the injustice can be redressed through collective action. Lacking either mobilizing perception (or the strong constituent emotions needed to make them "actionable"), it is highly unlikely that a movement will develop. Conditioning the presence or absence of these perceptions is that complex of social psychological dynamics–collective attribution, social construction–that David Snow and various of his colleagues (Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford, 1988) have referred to as *framing processes*.. When the cognitive/affective byproducts of these framing processes are combined with opportunities and organization, chances are great that collective action will develop.

**Movement Origins: A Critique of the Current Consensus**

The broadly consensual perspective sketched above has come to shape much current thinking on the origins of social movements. Movements are held to arise as a result of the fortuitous confluence of external political opportunities and internal organization and framing processes. At root this is a structuralist account of movement emergence and one that bears more than a passing resemblance to the original conceptual framework proposed in *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency*. To have influenced scholarship on this important topic is gratifying. But even as I embrace this perspective as an accurate rendering of the current consensus and a useful starting point for this effort, I am increasingly aware of the limits of the framework and the often wooden manner in which it has been applied by movement scholars. This awareness has emerged as a result of ongoing theoretical reflection on my part, and in

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response to the work of movement scholars critical of the generally structuralist assumptions which inform the framework sketched above. These critics are drawn from both the rationalist (Chong, 1991; Hardin, 1995; Kiser and Hechter, 1998; Lichbach, 1995, 1997, 1998) and culturalist (Fantasia, 1988; Goodwin and Jasper, 1998; Hart, 1996; Jasper, 1997; Somers, 1997) perspectives. Reflecting these various influences, I now see at least six serious problems with the dominant theoretical approach to the study of movement origins.[3] In this section, I use insights from rationalist and culturalist paradigms as well as other proximate literatures (e.g. comparative revolutions, democratization), both to animate the critique and to suggest partial solutions to these problems.

1. Threat or Opportunity? - In *From Mobilization to Revolution*, Tilly (1978) assigned equal weight to threat and opportunity as stimulants to collective action. But over the years, threat has given way to opportunity as the analytic *sine qua non* of many social movement scholars. Scholars of ethnic conflict (Lieberson, 1980; Olzak, 1992) may have erred in the opposite direction in identifying threats to the integrity of ethnic boundaries as the critical stimulant in episodes of ethnic conflict, but their general point seems unimpeachable. Based, then, on their work as well as that of a few visionary social movement scholars (e.g. Flacks, 1988), I have come to regard this singular preoccupation with opportunity as excessively narrow. This is especially true, I believe, in the case of movements in democratic settings. That is, in polities where there is some expectation of state responsiveness and few formal barriers to mobilization, we should expect perceived threats to group interests to serve, along with expanding opportunities, as two distinct precipitants of collective action. To the extent that scholars of contention—especially social movement scholars—have ignored the former in favor of the latter, I fear that our understanding of origins has been somewhat truncated.

2. The Culturally Constructed Nature of Threat/Opportunity - The earliest formulations of the political process model were rooted in an awareness of the culturalist dynamics that necessarily underlie collective action (McAdam 1982: 33-35, 48-51). But the sharp—if reified— distinction between objective conditions and their subjective interpretation that informed early versions of the model have generally been absent from later political process formulations. Perceived and socially constructed opportunities have given way to "political opportunity

*structures"* (POS) and, with this change, what once was conceived of as a structural/constructionist account of movement emergence has become a structurally determinist one. The troubling implication of the current consensus is that objective shifts in institutional rules, alliance structures, or some other dimension of the "political opportunity structure," virtually *compels* mobilization. This is a structuralist conceit that fails to grant collective meaning-making its central role in social life. Such structural shifts can only increase the likelihood that this or that challenging group will fashion that shared set of cognitive/affective understandings crucial to the initiation of collective action. The same holds true for *threat*. For increased ethnic competition (Olzak, 1992) *or any other change process*, to trigger an episode of contention, it must first be interpreted as threatening by a sufficiently large number of people to make collective action viable. In this sense, it is not the structural changes that set people in motion, but the shared understandings and conceptions of "we-ness" they develop to make sense of the trends. The importance of the trends derives, then, from the stimulus they provide to this interpretive process. In this sense, my perspective is Weberian, both in its conception of mobilization as a contingent, probabalistic outcome and in the central role assigned to collective meaning-making in the process.

So am I merely climbing onto the culturalist bandwagon by assaying this particular critique of the contemporary movement theory? Yes and no. This element of the critique is motivated by a respectful, if critical, reading of the cultural turn in movement studies. Culturalists have obviously taken meaning-making seriously and, through their work, deepened our understanding of the cognitive, affective, and ideational roots of contention (Jasper, 1997; Melucci, 1989, 1985; Somers, 1997). But, all too often in my view, they have failed to embed collaborative meaning making in the mix of relevant contexts–local history, local culture, local and extra-local politics– that constrain, even as they animate, the interpretive process. As a result they tend to overstate the plasticity of the process and gloss the way that various institutions–cultural no less than political–set probabalistic limits on the outcomes of same.

3. The Structural Determinist Conception of Mobilizing Structures - The overriding structural bias animating the current theoretical consensus is evident, not only in how opportunities (and threats) have been conceived, but in the theoretical importance attached to

"mobilizing *structures*" and the related account of movement recruitment offered by proponents of the perspective. That account stresses the role of established organizations or prior network ties in pulling people into active participation in a movement. To their credit, these structural/network analysts have not simply hypothesized these effects; they have also produced a great deal of empirical work that supports the notion of "structural proximity" as a strong predictor of differential recruitment to activism (Bolton, 1972; Briet, Klandermans and Kroon, 1987; Fernandez and McAdam, 1988; Gould, 1993, 1995; McAdam, 1986; McAdam and Paulsen, 1993; Orum, 1972; Rosenthal et al., 1985; Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson, 1980; Walsh and Warland, 1983). What they have generally failed to do, however, is to offer an explicit sociological/social-psychological explanation for the robust empirical findings they have produced. By default, they are guilty of assaying a structurally determinist account of movement recruitment. We are left with the unfortunate impression that individuals who are structurally proximate to a movement are virtually compelled to get involved by virtue of knowing others who are already active. There are a host of good reasons why we should reject this simple structural imperative, but here I want to highlight only two.

First, the above account skirts the important question of origins. That is, to say that people join movements because they know others who are involved, ignores the obvious fact that on the eve of the movement, there are no salient alters available as models for egos involvement. The more general point I want to make is that for any established organization or associational network to become a central node in movement recruitment requires a great deal of creative cultural work that has been totally glossed in the dominant account, which is simultaneously too individualist and too structuralist for my taste. For extant organizations or networks to become sites of mobilization/recruitment, they must be *culturally* conceived and constructed as such by a significant subset of the group's members. I will have much more to say about this critically important process of *social appropriation* later in the Introduction. For now, I simply want to underscore its importance and to note its absence in the current theoretical consensus. I illustrate the phenomenon with the following example. To say that the American civil rights movement emerged within a network of southern black churches tells us nothing about how those churches– or more precisely their ministerial leadership and congregations–came to see themselves as appropriate sites for mobilization. This is a *collaborative, cultural* project about which the

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current structural model of recruitment can tell us almost nothing.

The second key lacuna with the structural perspective is the one I mentioned above; that its proponents have failed to sketch even a rudimentary model of individual motivation and action to explain the observed network effects.[4] The structuralists are not alone in this. For all the importance they attach to social construction and human agency, most culturalists advance an implicit view of the individual that is curiously determinist in its own right. Individuals are shaped, not by structural forces, but by disembodied culture. But in both cases, the effect is the same; the potential for individual autonomy and choice is largely denied, replaced by a conception of the individual as acted upon, rather than acting.

For their part, rationalists have articulated a model of individual motivation and action. And while I think it is a truncated view of the individual, I nonetheless take seriously the need for such a model and for the articulation of mechanisms that bridge the micro, meso and macro dimensions of contentious politics. I do not pretend to deliver on a formal model of this sort in this Introduction. For now, I want to make a single foundational point: in my view a viable model of the individual must take full account of the fundamentally *social/relational* nature of human existence. This is not to embrace the oversocialized conception of the individual that I see informing the work of most structuralists and some culturalists. Consistent with the rationalists, I too stress the potential for individual autonomy and choice. Where I part company with the rationalists is in the central importance I attach to one powerful motivator of human action. I think most individuals act routinely to safeguard and sustain the central sources of meaning and identity in their lives. As a practical matter this means frequently prizing solidary incentives over all others and acting to insure that those whose approval and emotional sustenance are most central to our lives and sense of self are generally attended to. This assumption accords nicely with the empirical literature on movement recruitment. The rapid and effective mobilization that has been observed in existing solidary communities does not surprise me. *Which* of these previously non-political communities come to define contention as their *raison d'etre* is often highly surprising. But once this cultural appropriation has taken place, the rapid transformation of the collectivity into a vehicle of struggle is entirely consistent with the view I am proposing. In my view, the rationalists have it backward. It is not so much that calculating outsiders are compelled to affiliate with a movement as a result of the provision of individual selective

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incentives. Instead, some number of embedded insiders are threatened with the loss of meaning and membership for failure to adopt the new ideational and behavioral requirements of the collective.

4. The Movement-Centric Nature of the Perspective - Another lacuna I see associated with the current consensus (and movement theory in general), is a certain myopia in its general frame of reference. The dominant account of emergence is decidedly movement-centric in its sketch of causal factors. The opportunities/organization/framing triad take the incipient movement as the all-important frame of reference; the central pivot on which contention turns. Let me be clear. I regard the social settings within which initial mobilization takes place as key sites for analysis, but not the only sites. If it takes two to tango it takes at least two to "contend." That is, contentious politics necessarily involves the mobilization of state actors (and possibly other non-state elites) as well as potential challengers. We should be equally concerned with the processes and settings within which both sets of actors mobilize and especially interested in the unfolding patterns of interaction between the various parties to contention. From this point of view, it is ironic that a perspective–political process–that sought to theorize the intersection of institutionalized and non-institutionalized politics should have come, in its consensual embodiment, to focus almost exclusively on processes internal to movements. In this Introduction I want to return to the interactionist premises that informed the earliest writings in the tradition. In this sense, I want to move closer to the analytic framework that currently holds sway in the study of revolution and, in some quarters, democratization (Bermeo, 1997; O'Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Valenzuela, 1989) and away from that which characterizes the study of social movements.

5. The Multi-Level Nature of Political Opportunities and the Neglect of the International - In the quarter century since Peter Eisinger (1973) first used the term, the concept of political opportunity has come to be almost universally equated with the rules, institutional structure, and elite alliances characteristic of *national* political systems. Since Eisinger himself used the concept to compare *municipal* political systems, this equation of POS with nation state is ironic to say the least. The point is, the concept is inherently multi-level. Any system of institutional power can be

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simultaneously analyzed as a political opportunity structure. This points applies to non-state systems–institutional governance in a firm, for instance–no less than state. Here, however, I will confine myself to the multi-level institutional structuring of *state* power. Even here, though, things are plenty complicated enough. Throughout history, most polities have been embedded in a complex web of governing jurisdictions (te Brake, 1997; Tarrow, 1997). Even the modern nation state tends to nest power at more than one level.

The practical implications of this kind of multi-level system for the emergence of contention has generally escaped the attention of movement researchers. Once again, the tendency has been to conceptualize facilitative expansions in political opportunities as processes that unfold domestically. So changes in access rules, or shifts in political alignments have generally been explained by reference to developments at the national level. But as students of comparative revolution (Goldstone, 1991; Skocpol, 1979) have long appreciated, states can be rendered vulnerable by changes that emanate at many different levels. In the kind of "composite polities" profiled by te Brake (1997) and Tarrow (1997), significant changes or crises at any level of the system can set in motion contention and change at any other level. But even this expansion in our geographic/institutional approach to the definition of political opportunities, omits another critically important arena within which significant pressures for change often arise. Following the lead of Skocpol, Goldstone and others, I have in mind the international and specifically the pressures for change that devolve from perturbations in transnational political alliances and economic relations. Any synthetic understanding of the origins of non-routine politics will need to reflect this expanded understanding of the geographic and institutional locus of political opportunities.

6. <u>Static Perspective Versus Dynamic Model</u> - The final criticism of the prevailing model of movement emergence is a very general one. For all the support that the triad of opportunity/organization/framing currently enjoys among movement scholars, it should be obvious that this framework in no way constitutes a dynamic model of movement origins. Indeed, it is little more than a static listing of general factors presumed to be important in the development of collective action. But how these factors combine to trigger initial mobilization and by *what intervening mechanisms* is less clearly specified in the movement literature. I am, therefore,

motivated to replace this static listing of factors with a sketch of a set of highly contingent, dynamic relationships which are apt to shape the likelihood of movement emergence. This sketch is given in figure 1.

[figure 1 about here]

**Elaborating the Model** - The figure depicts movement emergence as a highly contingent outcome of an ongoing process of interaction involving at least one set of state actors and one challenger. In point of fact, while I focus here on state/challenger interaction, I think the perspective is applicable to episodes of contention that do not involve state actors. The framework can be readily adapted to analyzing the emergence of contention in any system of institutionalized power (e.g. a firm, a church). The generic model only requires that the analyst be able to identity at least one *member* and one *challenger* whose ongoing interaction sets in motion a broader episode of contention. Following Gamson (1990), *members* are collective actors whose interests are routinely taken into account in decision-making processes within the setting in question. *Challengers* are collective actors who "lack the basic prerogative of members--routine access to decisions that affect them" (Gamson, 1990). But while this fundamental distinction can be applied to many settings, here I will restrict myself to episodes of contention that develop out of sustained interaction between a special kind *of member*–that is, state actors–and at least one *challenger*. Instances of non-routine contention that do not conform to this framework, lie outside the scope of the inquiry.

One of the virtues of the perspective sketched here is that it is as amenable to the analysis of routine as contentious politics. Too often analysts have reified the distinction between routine politics and social movements, revolutions and the like and wound up proposing separate theories to account for the two phenomena. Since I see the latter almost always growing out of and often transforming the former, I am motivated to propose a framework that is equally adept at explaining both. That is the case with the perspective sketched in figure 1. Routine politics depends on the same general processes of interpretation, attribution, and appropriation as contentious politics; it is only the outcome of these processes that is different in the two cases. Routine collective action–that is action that serves essentially to reproduce the existing structure

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of polity relations—occurs either when (1) no attribution of threat/opportunity is forthcoming, or (2) when those asserting the existence of such a threat/opportunity are unable to appropriate the organizational vehicle necessary to act on the attribution. Innovative collective action requires not only that such an attribution be made but that it then be adopted as the guiding frame for action by an existing collectivity.

The figure identifies five processes that shape this unfolding dynamic. The remainder of this section is given over to a discussion of these five processes as I see them manifest in the U.S. civil rights movement. The aim is to revisit a case familiar to social movement analysts to see how our understanding of the movement is altered by viewing it through a more dynamic, process-oriented analytic framework. This approach would appear to substitute an deductive approach to case analysis for the inductive program sketched at the beginning of the Introduction. In point of fact, neither approach captures the inherently reciprocal interplay between "theory" and "evidence" that has guided this project. That is, recent contributions to the historiography of the civil rights movement have prompted me to rethink aspects of my original theoretical formulation, just as contemporary theoretical debates have altered my reading of the case. But for heuristic purposes and to insure consistency with the original book, I will adhere to the same narrative conventions as I did then. That is, I will use the lens of "general theory"—in this case figure 1—to structure my retelling of the case.

1. Exogenous Change Processes - A host of specific literatures have made note of the important role of broad change processes in destabilizing previously stable social and political relations, thereby helping to set in motion episodes of contention. Work on comparative revolutions has identified external wars (Skocpol, 1979) or more generic economic and/or demographic strains (Goldstone, 1991) as the usual precipitants of the kinds of state crises that typically devolve into revolution. Like Goldstone, scholars in the ethnic competition tradition (Lieberson, 1980; Olzak, 1992) have often fingered a mix of demographic and economic change processes as the backdrop against which episodes of ethnic conflict and violence have taken place. But presumably any broad change processes that serve to erode barriers to ethnic/racial contact and competition have the potential to serve as the manifest triggers of contention. Finally, social movement theory has privileged one kind of change process—expanding political opportunities—

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over all others as the proximate cause of initial mobilization. But, even allowing for the kind of broadening of the institutional/geographic locus of political opportunities urged in number 4 above, the fact of the matter is, most shifts in POS are themselves responses to broader change processes. What kind of change processes? A finite list of specific causes would be impossible to compile. The point is that:

> any event or broad social process that serves to undermine the calculations
> and assumptions on which the political establishment is structured
> occasions a shift in political opportunities. Among the events and
> processes likely to prove disruptive of the political status quo are wars,
> industrialization, international political alignments, prolonged [economic
> woes], and widespread demographic changes (McAdam, 1982: 41).

The above list includes most, if not all, of the broad change processes highlighted by work on comparative revolutions, ethnic conflict, and, to a lesser extent, democratization. The list also accords well with the specific mix of change processes that served to alter the interpretive context shaping action by all parties to the civil rights struggle.

With the withdrawal of federal troops from the American South in 1876, control over southern race relations again passed into the hands of the region's political and economic elite. Predictably, this reassertion of regional control over racial matters spelled an end to whatever political influence African-Americans had been able to exercise during Reconstruction. This "arrangement" held for better than 50 years, reflecting the continuing viability of the political calculus on which it had been based. But, as Gunnar Myrdal remarked with great foresight in 1944, the arrangement never constituted a "stable power equilibrium" and appeared at last to "be approaching its end." Among the change processes that served to destabilize the arrangement was the marked decline of the cotton economy, especially after 1930, and the massive northward migration of blacks the decline helped set in motion. What makes this mass exodus more than simply a demographic curiosity are the political consequences that flowed from it. "The move was more than a simple migration and change in folkways; for blacks, it was a move, almost literally from no voting to voting" (Brooks, 1974:17). The migrants were drawn disproportionately from states with the lowest percentage of registered black voters and, in turn, settled overwhelmingly in seven northern industrial states–New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania,

Ohio, California, Illinois and Michigan–that were widely regarded as the keys to electoral success in presidential contests.

> The electoral significance of this....migration was evident in both
> the 1944 and 1948 elections. In both instances, had blacks reversed
> the proportion of votes they gave the two major candidates, the
> Republican challenger, Thomas Dewey, would have defeated his
> Democratic opponents, Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman....
> By 1950, then, the so-called black vote was firmly established as
> an electoral force of national significance (McAdam, 1982: 81).

All of the change processes discussed to this point were domestic in nature. This is consistent with the account offered in the 1982 book and the general nation-centric bias evident in most of the social movement literature. Since then there has occurred something of a minor revolution in the historiography of the civil rights movement that has granted increased attention to the role of international factors in the origins of the struggle (see, for example, Dudziak, 1988; Layton, 1995; Plummer, 1996; Skrentny, 1998). This scholarship has significantly altered my view of the relative causal importance of domestic and international change processes in the emergence of the movement. In summary, while the decline of "King Cotton" and the Great Migration certainly altered the interpretive context that had sustained the racial status quo, it was the onset of the Cold War that changed it irrevocably. Consider the stark contrast between Roosevelt and Truman on the matter of the "Negro question." In 1936 FDR was elected to his second term. His margin of victory–popular as well as electoral–remains one of the largest in the history of presidential politics. The election also marked a significant shift in racial politics in the U.S. For the first time since African-Americans had been granted the franchise, black voters deserted the Republican Party–the Party of Lincoln–to cast the majority of their votes for a Democratic presidential candidate. The New Deal reforms had been accompanied by a general leftward swing in political attitudes and had conditioned the American people to countenance assertive government action on behalf of the "less fortunate" segments of American society. Finally, FDR was himself a liberal–socially no less than politically–as was his outspoken and influential wife, Eleanor. Yet, in spite of all these factors, Roosevelt remained silent on racial matters throughout his four term presidency, refusing even to come out in favor of anti-lynching

legislation on the numerous occasions such bills were brought before Congress.

Just ten years later, FDR's successor, Harry Truman, inaugurated a period of active executive advocacy of civil rights when he appointed and charged his national Committee on Civil Rights with investigating the "current remedies of civil rights in the country and recommending appropriate legislative remedies for deficiencies uncovered" (quoted in McAdam, 1982: 84). Two years later, in 1948, Truman issued two landmark executive orders, the first establishing a fair employment board within the Civil Service Commission, and the second calling for the gradual desegregation of the armed forces. Why had Truman acted when Roosevelt did not? Comparing the domestic political contexts in which FDR and Truman acted only deepens the puzzle. While Roosevelt's electoral margins left him politically secure, Truman's status as a non-incumbent, made him uniquely vulnerable to challenge as he pointed toward the 1948 election. Moreover, with black voters now returning solid majorities for his Party, Truman had seemingly little to gain and everything to lose by alienating that strange, but critically important, New Deal bedfellow: the southern Dixiecrat. And, that, of course, is precisely what his advocacy of civil rights reform did. Angered by his proactive support for civil rights, the Dixiecrats broke away from the Party in 1948 and ran their own candidate, Strom Thurmond, for President. The electoral votes of the once "solid South" were now in jeopardy of being lost. Add to this Truman's own attitudinal qualms about race (McCullough, 1992) and the "chilling effect" the Cold War had on the American Left and one could hardly think of a less propitious time to be advocating for politically and socially progressive causes.

The key to the mystery lies, not in the domestic context, but in the new pressures and considerations thrust upon the U.S. and the Executive Branch in particular, in the post-war period. It is again interesting to quote Myrdal's (1970: 35) prescient remarks on the subject.

> The Negro Problem....has also acquired tremendous international implications, and this is another and decisive reason why the white North is prevented from compromising with the White South regarding the Negro....Statesmen will have to take cognizance of the changed geopolitical situation of the nation and carry out important adaptations of the American way of life to new necessities. A main adaptation is bound to be the

redefinition of the Negro's status in American democracy.

In short, the otherwise puzzling contrast between Truman's actions and FDR's inaction, becomes entirely comprehensible when placed in the very different international contexts in which they occurred. The Cold War world view that came to dominate American policy making in the post-war period dramatically changed the interpretive context of U.S. racial politics and the actions that flowed from it. I turn to this aspect of the analytic framework next.

2. Interpretive Processes and the Collective Attribution of Opportunity/Threat - As with all of social life, it is the ongoing interpretation of events by various collectivities that shapes the likelihood of movement emergence. Indeed, these continuous processes of sense-making and collective attribution are arguably more important in movements insofar as the latter requires participants to reject institutionalized routines and taken for granted assumptions about the world and to fashion new world views and lines of interaction. And yet, for all their importance, these crucial interpretive dynamics are largely absent from our theories of the origins of movements and other forms of contentious politics. There is virtually no mention of these processes in the theoretical work on ethnic conflict, or the dominant structuralist approach to comparative revolution.[5] One is left, in both cases, with the distinct impression that structural changes (e.g. erosion of ethnic boundaries, fiscal or demographic pressures) give rise to contention without regard to these intervening interpretive processes.

There is perhaps a bit more attention to processes of this sort in the contemporary literature on social movements. Much of this attention has centered around what have come to be known as "framing processes." But most of the conceptual work on framing betrays a more strategic/instrumental, and therefore later temporal, orientation to collective interpretation than we have in mind here.[6] The earliest work in this tradition by David Snow and various of his colleagues (Snow et al., 1986; Snow and Benford, 1988) equated framing with the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world of and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action. In other words, framing was largely an activity pursued by groups that already defined themselves as engaged in struggle. One part of that struggle involved the group or its agents in conscious efforts to "frame" their activities in ways that resonated with various audiences (e.g. potential adherents, the media, policymakers,

bystander publics) whom the group hoped to influence. My point is that, for all of their importance, these later framing efforts depend on earlier and far more contingent interpretive processes. Strategic framing implies adherence to a non-routine and conflictual definition of the situation. But this definition is itself a product of earlier processes of collective interpretation and attribution.

Even where these earlier, more contingent, interpretive processes have been the focus of theoretical attention, they have been framed in a decidedly movement-centric way. Consider the following quote from *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency* (p. 48):

> While important, expanding political opportunities and indigenous
> organizations do not, in any simple sense, produce a social movement.
> .....Together they only offer insurgents a certain objective "structural
> potential" for collective political action. Mediating between
> opportunity and action are people and the subjective meanings they
> attach to their situations....This process must occur if an organized
> protest campaign is to take place.

All well and good. But it is not only the potential challenging groups who are engaged in these interpretive processes. If collective interpretation is endemic to social life, we can expect the kind of broad change processes discussed in the previous section to set in motion especially intensive and potentially consequential sense making activities by all parties to the conflict. All manner of groups will be seeking first to make sense of the changes and secondly to assess the degree of threat or opportunity the changes may pose for the collectivity. There is, of course, no guarantee that these processes will result in the kind of shared conception of threat or opportunity that I think is requisite for innovative collective action, but the potential for such conceptions is always there; a potential whose realization is only enhanced by the magnitude of the change processes and their "proximity" to the group in question.

So in the case of the civil rights movement, African-Americans were far from the only ones trying to make sense of the mix of change processes discussed in the previous section. Various state and non-state elites were also cognizant of these changes and sought to monitor and assess their significance as potential "threats" or "opportunities." The most significant of these changes was the onset of the Cold War. One of the tenets of the framework proposed here is that

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we should expect *framebreaks*–that is shared definitions of the situation that undermine social reproduction–to develop among those whose interests or collective identity place them "close" to the issue in question. And so it was in the case of the civil rights movement. This was true for civil rights forces and state actors alike. Two quick examples will help to illustrate the point and underscore the significance of novel interpretive processes in the development of the movement.

One such significant interpretive "moment" occurred in the mid-1930s when key figures in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) argued that Roosevelt's appointments to the Supreme Court and more general legal/cultural trends augured well for a concerted legal campaign aimed at challenging segregated schools (Kluger, 1976; Rosenberg, 1991; Tushnet, 1987). Or to put the matter more abstractly, an innovative interpretation of emerging environmental opportunity led to the adoption of a logically consistent plan for concerted collective action.

A second such significant interpretive "moment" in the history of the movement occurred among state actors far removed from and with little substantive interest in the issue of civil rights. Even before the end of World War II, a serious debate was underway among policymakers within the State Department and the foreign policy community in general over the shape of the post-war world and its implications for the formulation and execution of U.S. policy, domestic as well as foreign. Those pushing a Cold War template prevailed in this debate. The stark attribution of threat animating this view inspired calls for various policy innovations, including impassioned pleas from the diplomatic core–especially those with postings in the third world and Western Europe–for civil rights reforms to counter Soviet efforts to exploit American racism for its obvious propaganda value (Layton, 1995). Truman's civil rights initiatives were one response to these pleas. Another was the series of briefs filed by the U.S. Attorney General in connection with various civil rights cases heard before the Supreme Court after 1948. Arguably the most important of these briefs was one filed in December 1952 in connection with a public school desegregation case–Brown v. Topeka Board of Education–then before the Court. The brief makes clear the link between the Cold War interpretive frame and the substantive shift in federal civil rights policy. In part the brief read: "it is in the context of the present world struggle between freedom and tyranny that the problem of racial discrimination must be viewed....Racial discrimination furnishes grist for the Communist propaganda mills, and it raises doubt even among

friendly nations as to the intensity of our devotion to the democratic faith" (quoted in McAdam, 1982: 83).

3. <u>Appropriation of Existing Organizational Space and Routine Collective Identities</u> - But even an interpretive process that results in a group of people attributing great significance to a perceived environmental "threat" or "opportunity" does not insure the emergence of a movement. For collective attributions of threat or opportunity to key emergent collective action the interpreters must command sufficient organization and numbers to provide a social/organizational base for mobilization. The ideational challenge thus gets joined to a more narrowly organizational one. Would be activists–of either the elite or non-elite variety–must either create an organizational vehicle and supporting collective identity as prerequisites for action or appropriate an existing organization and the routine collective identity on which it rests. The empirical literature on movement emergence suggests that the latter is far and away the more common pattern, but some such embedding of "threat" or "opportunity" in organization/identity is required for action to develop.[7]

Both state actors and challengers face serious obstacles in their attempts to appropriate existing social space in the service of emergent collective action. Both sets of actors are likely to contend with an established leadership that does not share their interpretation of recent events as posing a significant threat to or opportunity for the realization of group interests. But above and beyond this generic obstacle, state actors would seem to possess one clear advantage over most challenging groups when it comes to the appropriation of extant social space/identities. The fact of the matter is, for state actors, most of the ongoing interpretation of social change processes takes place in formal organizations geared to the defense or advocacy of state (and associated elite) interests and organized around collective identities explicitly tied to these aims. So, to return to the civil rights example, when elements in the Justice Department came, in the immediate post-war period to define Jim Crow segregation as a real threat to the realization of American interests, they "merely" had to prevail in an internal Department debate for action to commence. Once they did, they already had an organizational vehicle and orienting collective identity at their disposal to facilitate innovative collective action.

Let me put the matter differently as a way of highlighting the relevance of certain

rationalist assumptions to an understanding of the beginnings of contentious politics. While I am in sympathy with much of the critique of the rational choice perspective that has been advanced by social movement scholars (see, for example, Ferree, 1992), I think the field as a whole has been far too quick to reject any insight that smacks of rationalist assumptions. To take the empirical phenomenon under discussion here, it would seem that the rational choice perspective provides the best general framework for analyzing the mobilization of state actors during the incipient phase of a social movement. It is entirely reasonable, and useful, in my view, to assume a relatively fixed set of collective interests on the part of state actors, and, indeed, all other established parties to any developing conflict. So it was these relatively stable interest on the part of officials in the State Department, Justice Department, the White House, the national NAACP, etc.-- *when joined to the emerging definition of threat/opportunity*-- that motivated the forms of innovative collective action that I will discuss in the next section.

But in highlighting the general usefulness of a rationalist framework in the analysis of movement emergence, I want to note the limits of the perspective as well. If movements turned only on the action of institutionalized members and challengers, then the rational choice perspective might be fully adequate as a framework for analyzing the motivational basis of emergent collective action. But, as I will argue later, the defining quality of movements (and all other instances of contentious politics) is the mobilization of previously unorganized or non-political challengers. It is in regard to such groups that the rationalist perspective is inadequate as a framework for analyzing initial action. For here the assumption of a fixed and relatively stable set of interest-or utilities is simply not born out in reality. To illustrate the point I return to the civil rights example, but focus not on the early period of state mobilization in the immediate post-World War II era, but the emergence of the *mass* civil rights movement of the mid-1950s.

Here the movement developed not in previously established civil rights organizations, but in local networks rooted for the most part in black churches (Morris, 1984). This example places the dynamic of appropriation in stark relief. For while the movement's debt to the black church is widely acknowledged, the standard narrative account of the movement's rise obscures an organizational and cultural accomplishment of enormous importance. Until the rise of the movement, it was common for social observers–black no less than white–to depict the black church as a generally conservative institution with a decided emphasis not on the "social gospel in

action," but the realization of rewards in the afterlife (Johnson, 1941; Marx, 1971; Mays and Nicholson, 1969). As Charles Payne's (1996) extraordinary book on the movement in Mississippi makes clear, the conservative nature of local black clergy remained an obstacle to local organizing well into the 1960s.

Given this more complicated portrait of the black church, the importance and highly contingent nature of the appropriation process should be clear. To turn even some black congregations into vehicles of collective protest, early movement leaders had to engage in a lot of creative cultural/organizational work, by which the aims of the church and its animating collective identity were redefined to accord with the goals of the emerging struggle. Here again, then, we find that rationalist and culturalist insights must be combined if we are to fully understand the origins of the civil rights movement. The rational choice framework gives us reasonable purchase on the emerging lines of action by various established parties to the conflict in the years immediately following World War II. But to understand how the black church as an institution-- and particular black congregations--came to be defined as a site of protest activity, nothing short of a detailed, culturalist account of the transformation will do.

4. <u>Innovative Collective Action and the Onset of Contention</u> - Figure 1 captures my analytic punch line as regards movement origins. Innovative collective action--that is *action that departs from previous collective routines*--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. This dynamic would appear to apply equally to state actors and challengers. Indeed, in virtually all cases, I believe that an understanding of the emergence of contentious politics requires much more attention to the interaction of state actors and challengers in advance of what is typically perceived to be the onset of movement.

Theorists of revolution and social movements have been right, I think, to stress the importance of various kinds of "expanding political opportunities" or developing state crises to the development of contention. And although scholars of revolution have typically done a better job of analyzing the actions of various elites in this process than movement theorists have, neither group has sought to formally build state or other elite collective action into their models of

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contention. That is what I have tried to do here. Rather than conceiving of challenging groups as interpreting and reacting to various kinds of environmental shifts, it seems more sensible to see state and non-state actors as simultaneously responding to exogenous change processes and ultimately to each other as they seek to make sense of their situations and to fashion lines of action based on these shifting interpretations of reality. From this perspective, what come to be defined as political opportunities by challenging groups are themselves byproducts of innovative collective action by *state (or other elite)* actors designed to effectively counter perceived threats to or opportunities for the realization of their interests. If these state actions are defined as new opportunities (or threats) by challenging groups, responsive episodes of insurgent collective action are likely to follow, setting the stage for yet another round of state action. Once this iterative dance of stimulus-response begins in earnest, we can say that we have left the realm of *prescribed politics* and entered into an episode of *contentious politics*. I will have more to say about this distinction at the close of the article. For now it is important only to recognize that we have left the realm of routine politics.

At a cognitive level, such episodes grow out of and depend upon a perception of significant environmental uncertainty on the part of state actors and challengers alike. This shared perception insures that both sides will continue to see the situation as one posing significant threats to and/or opportunities for the realization of group interests. The affective salience of these perceptions and the novelty and intensity of the actions that follow from them will determine just how far the episode spreads beyond the initial combatants. That is, the initial interactive moves of the original combatants represent a new source of environmental change with the potential to set in motion the same processes of interpretation, attribution, appropriation and innovative action on the part of other "proximate" social groups. The episode will likely continue as long as enough parties to the expanded conflict continue to define the situation as one of significant environmental uncertainty requiring sustained mobilization to manage (in the case of threat) or exploit (in the case of opportunity).

The burgeoning civil rights struggle can certainly be analyzed in this way. In the post-war years there quickly developed a heightened sense of environmental uncertainty as regards "the Negro question." This uncertainty frame was initially shared by three already constituted sets of combatants: federal officials (especially those in the Executive and Judicial branches), established

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civil rights groups, and southern segregationists. With the establishment and solidification of this shared frame, the frequency of innovative action by all three groups increased markedly during these years. I have already mentioned the string of policy reforms or otherwise facilitative actions undertaken by federal actors in the late 1940s/early 50s. The pace of civil rights action-- principally litigation--increased as well, as did membership rates in the established civil rights organizations (Lawson, 1976; McAdam, 1982; Meier and Rudwick, 1973). For their part, southern segregationists grew ever more restive too. The aforementioned Dixiecrat revolt of 1948 was only a harbinger of things to come. The full flowering of segregationist insurgency followed in the wake of the 1954, and especially the 1955, Supreme Court rulings in the *Brown* case (Lawson, 1976; McMillen, 1971).

The important implication of this sketch of the conflict's origins is that analysts have long erred in seeing the Montgomery Bus Boycott as the beginning of the struggle. Given my emphasis on the crucial importance of innovative interpretive processes and the development of a shared sense of environmental uncertainty by state actors and challenging groups, I think it more accurate to say that this particular episode began early in the post-war period and certainly by the time of the Dixiecrat revolt in 1948. Montgomery then represents a crucial escalation of the conflict, but not its point of origin. Indeed, rather than Montgomery making the movement, the reverse is actually true. It was the prior onset of the *national* conflict that granted the *local* struggle in Montgomery so much significance. Without its embedding in the existing national episode it is not at all clear that Montgomery would have had the kind of impact it did, or that the key actors in the local struggle would have behaved in the same manner. In short, it was the *nationalization* of the local conflict that shaped events in Montgomery and accounts for its singular importance in the history of the movement.

But if Montgomery did not actually trigger the conflict, it nonetheless represents a significant escalation of the struggle. It marks the onset of an episode of *constitutive contention* out of an earlier period of *constituted contention*. Prior to Montgomery, virtually all of the contentious interaction took place between publicly constituted and self-consciously defined political groups. The principal combatants were different elements within the federal government, including the southern segregationist block within Congress, established civil rights organizations, the two national parties, and for a period of time, the renegade Dixiecrat Party. This situation is

what I have termed *constituted contention*, so named because the groups involved are already constituted as public, political actors. Formally defined, *constituted contention* is:

> *episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and*
>
> *opponents when a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of*
>
> *claims, or a party to the claims, b) the claims would, if realized, affect*
>
> *the interests of at least one of the claimants, and c) where all the*
>
> *parties to the conflict were previously established as constituted*
>
> *political actors. Constitutive contention,* in contrast, replaces c) with
>
> two new definitional elements. While *constituted contention* is confined
>
> to previously established political actors, *constitutive contention* involves
>
> *c) the mobilization of newly self-identified political actors, and d) at*
>
> *least some reliance on non-institutionalized.....forms of political action.*
>
> *Constitutive contention* is, thus, constitutive both of new actors and,
>
> potentially, new forms of action (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly,
>
> forthcoming)(emphasis in original).

In the case of the civil rights movement, among the first of these newly constituted collectivities were a number of African-American congregations in Montgomery. But before the movement was to run its course a good many other unorganized or non-political collectivities were to join the fray.

The terms *constituted* and *constitutive* are but two of the four modes of political interaction that define the universe of all possibilities. The full four-fold schema is sketched in figure 2.

[figure 2 about here]

The vertical axis refers to the nature of the actors involved in the conflict. The horizontal axis characterizes the degree of perceptual certainty/uncertainty underlying the conflict. Under conditions of high certainty, institutionalized political groups engage in *prescribed politics*; that is, highly routinized decision-making and administrative interaction that, allowing for minor shifts in the fortunes of various parties, results in the reproduction of the political status quo. Should unorganized and/or non-political groups mobilize in highly certain times, they will almost always confront a closed or unresponsive political system. Such situations might be termed instances of

*subterranean politics*. In nominally democratic contexts, challenges of this sort are very likely to be ignored. In non-democratic settings, this kind of challenge is almost always illegal and thus, an invitation to repression by state authorities, unless it corresponds to the forms of "everyday resistance" to which the work of James Scott has sensitized us (1985).

My main interest here lies with the two modes of politics that make up the right half of the figure. Together they define the terrain of *contentious politics*. Why am I so interested in *constituted* and *constitutive contention*? Because it is in the zone of action defined by the two that institutionalized and non-institutionalized politics meet and where the possibilities for change through collective action are determined. I am also interested in this zone, because it typically represents the point of origin of contentious episodes and the locus of action shaping its trajectory over time. Like the American civil rights movement, I suspect that most broad reform movements and revolutions have their origins in less visible, but highly consequential episodes of *constituted contention* that serve simultaneously to render a given political system more vulnerable to challenge and to telegraph this fact to previously unorganized or nominally apolitical segments of the population. By encouraging the latter to mobilize, these instances of institutionalized conflict evolve into broader episodes *constitutive contention*. But without understanding the origin of these episodes in more conventional, if non-routine, conflict processes, researchers–especially movement researchers–have often truncated the phenomenon they study.

## Discussion and Conclusion

I have covered a lot of ground in this Introduction and tried to do a good many things. In closing, I hope to articulate the main implications of my theoretical ruminations and the case which inspired them. I will stress two such implications: for social movement theory, and for the possibility of prediction in the study of movement origins.

**Implications for Social Movement Theory -** The prevailing model of movement emergence was shaped to a considerable degree by the study of, and reflections on, the U.S. civil rights movement (Eisinger, 1973; McAdam, 1982; Morris, 1984). It is ironic, then, to conclude that the existing theoretical consensus is inadequate to fully account for the origins of the very movement that animated the perspective in the first place. But that is very much the conclusion I have come to

here. The incorporation of insights from other "proximate" literatures (e.g. revolution, ethnic conflict) and from rationalist and culturalist perspectives on social movements has fundamentally changed my understanding of the case and of movement origins more generally. In this section I want to note the key insights from these other literatures/perspectives that have prompted this reevaluation. I begin with three specific empirical insights drawn from the literatures on revolution and ethnic conflict (and, to a lesser extent, democratization).

The cultural turn in the study of social movements mirrors a more general trend in sociology and the social sciences. While decried by many, the trend has, in my view, had a decidedly salutary effect on the social movements field. It has had the effect of organizing a host of critically important issues back into the study of social movements and collective action. These issues would include: the importance of collective identity in struggle (Friedman and McAdam, 1992; Taylor and Whittier, 1992); the role of emotion in collective action (Aminzade and McAdam, forthcoming; Taylor, 1996) and framing and other meaning-making processes (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991; Snow et al., 1986; Snow and Benford, 1988) as a central component of movement mobilization. However, for all the attention devoted to cultural processes in social movements, the dominant analytic framework in the field has remained resolutely structuralist. Even the attempt to "soften" the perspective by adding "framing" to the mix has only succeeded in "structuralizing" the concept, by rendering meaning-making as little more than a strategic challenge facing mature movements previously "birthed" through the fortuitous confluence of favorable political opportunities and available mobilizing structures.

In short, the real promise of the "cultural revolution" in movement studies has not been realized to this point. It can only be realized if we place the processes of collective interpretation, meaning-making, and what elsewhere has been termed *social appropriation* (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, forthcoming), at the center of our models of movement emergence, development and decline. That is what I have sought to do here. While the original political process impulse was to assert the influence of structural factors only as subjectively interpreted, in actual practice the crucial interpretive processes have tended to be ignored in favor of a more structurally determinist account of movement origins. In revisiting the original structural/cultural formulation of the model, I find myself in general sympathy with those who have criticized the "structural bias" of contemporary movement theory and urged greater recognition of the role of interpretation and

construction in collective action (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991; Goodwin and Jasper, 1998; Jasper, 1997; Melucci, 1989, 1985). Where I part company from my more culturalist colleagues is in asserting the *probabalistic* limits that various kinds of structures–including, as I noted earlier, cultural structures–and real world events would appear to impose on interpretive processes. This does not mean that structural factors dictate certain kinds of interpretations or the meaning of real world events is somehow clear on their face. I want to hold out the possibility that people can fashion and act on powerful collective action frames in otherwise unpromising structural circumstances. Indeed, though I remain somewhat unconvinced by his evidence, Charles Kurzman's (1996) account of the origins of the Iranian revolution *may* represent a case of this kind. My more general point, is that such anomalous cultural readings of environmental conditions are bound to be rare, both because such readings are unlikely to find many adherents and/or sufficient environmental "receptivity" to survive long enough to be recognized as movements. But I concede that such outcomes are possible. Similarly, I can well imagine promising structural circumstances–that is, ones rife with imminent "threat" or "opportunity"–that fail to produce so much as a ripple of protest activity. Indeed, I regard such cases as modal. So daunting are the multiple barriers--psychological, cultural, organizational and political--to mobilization, that I am quite convinced that many structurally "favored" movements die aborning.

But for all the indeterminacy of the relationship between environmental conditions, cultural construction, and actual mobilization, it won't do to pretend these relationships don't exist. If culture, in Ann Swidler's unfortunate phrase, really were a "tool kit" (Swidler, 1986), we could expect people to avail themselves of the empowering possibilities inherent in that tool kit far more often than they do. In fact, most of the time people experience culture as a set of binding cognitive, affective, and behavioral strictures. The question then becomes, under what conditions are we likely to transcend these strictures and to rediscover the tool-like promise of multi-vocal cultural materials? Swidler seems to answer this query in much the way I would. She draws a distinction between culture's role during "settled" and "unsettled" times. As she writes (1986: 278): "there are....more and less settled lives, and more and less settled cultural periods. Individuals in certain phases of their lives, and groups or entire societies in certain historical periods are involved in constructing new strategies of action." It is during these "less settled" or

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more uncertain periods, then, that we are apt to experience culture as a tool kit. But how are we to account for the onset of these "unsettled times?" In my view, the kind of *exogenous change processes* discussed above constitute the source of Swidler's turbulence, increasing the likelihood that cognitive and affective routines will be abandoned in the search for new interpretations of reality and the innovative lines of action that follow from same.[8]

I find myself responding in somewhat similar fashion to a second key concept in the culturalist kit-bag as I have to the general issue of the relationship between environmental conditions and social interpretation. The concept in question is that of "collective identity." It should be clear from the perspective sketched in the previous section that I take the concept very seriously. Indeed, I regard the "appropriation of established collective identities" as a requisite for the emergence of all social movements. Traditionally culturalists have deployed the concept in a different, though not contradictory, way. They have used the concept to highlight the ways in which movements may serve as vehicles for the creation and dissemination of new collective identities ( Melucci, 1989, 1985; Taylor, 1997; Taylor and Whittier, 1992). I would grant this important cultural function of movements, but think the processes by which existing collective identities get redefined so as to serve as the motivational basis for emergent action are equally interesting and clearly more relevant to the question of movement origins. Finally, in referencing the *motivational* force of existing collective identities, I feel compelled to take the culturalists to task for failing to articulate or ground their perspective in any foundational model of human action and motivation. In this they are no less guilty than the structuralists, but having been so critical of the rationalist view of collective action, it would seem incumbent on both structuralists and culturalists to propose alternatives to the rational actor model.

This brings me conveniently to the rationalists. My reaction to the various rationalist perspectives on collective action is as complicated as my take on the culturalists. Perhaps the key injunction I take away from these perspectives is simply the need to take the question of motivation seriously. But beyond the need to confront the basic issue, I also regard the central tenets of rational actor models as a useful general framework for analyzing the actions of some of the actors involved in the origins of contention. As noted previously, I regard the framework as a viable baseline model for understanding the actions of all established parties during what I have called the initial phase of *constituted contention*. As institutionalized actors with relatively well

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defined interests, we can expect that perceived threats to or opportunities for the realization of those interests will provide sufficient motivation for innovative lines of collective action. More generally, the very language of threat and opportunity implies adherence to at least a limited notion of rationality. The notions of threat and opportunity only make sense in relation to some set of unstated interests that define what is being threatened or made more opportunely realizable.

But in other respects the perspective sketched here diverges sharply from those of the rationalists. Two serious limits to the general perspective are worth noting. The first concerns its inadequacy as a framework for understanding the entrance of new, and previously non-political challengers into a developing episode of contention. The assumption of well defined and relatively fixed interests simply does not hold in regard to such groups. Given the decidedly apolitical stance and conservative theological strands that had tended to characterize the black church historically, there would have been no way for a rational choice analyst to have predicted the mobilization of certain black congregations in the early days of the civil rights movement. Here I am merely pointing to the longstanding and acknowledged failure of rationalists to account for the origins of individual preferences or interests. But this failure takes on greater importance when one is concerned with periods of rapid social change and emergent patterns of innovative collective action. As the role of the black church in the civil rights struggle indicates, such periods turn on the emergence of new interests, or the rapid transformation of behavioral expectations which attach to old interests. Either way, rational actor models are ill-equipped to explain such phenomena.

Finally, there is reason to take issue with that most sacred of rationalist shibboleths: the "free-rider problem." It is not that I take lightly the various barriers to mobilization which operate in social life. These barriers are formidable indeed. But at least as regards the origins of social movements, the "free-rider" dilemma would appear to be more formidable in theory than in practice. This disjuncture between theory and reality owes to the individualistic cast of the dilemma and the collective nature of its solution. Movements almost always arise through the transformation of an existing collective into a vehicle of collective protest. Thus the traditional formulation that poses the problem as one in which outsiders must be induced to join a movement is almost never approximated in real life. Instead, insiders are threatened with the loss of member benefits for failure to take part. Given the motivational importance I attach to the protection of

ones most intimate and primary attachments, the appropriation of a highly salient collective embedding (i.e. church, neighborhood) can be expected to carry with it a very different "default option" than the one animating the "free-rider dilemma." In the latter case the rational option is non-participation; in the former it is participation in the struggle. Notice, however, that in rejecting the specifics of the "free-rider" formulation, I am nonetheless disposed, with the rationalists, to explain individual recruitment into a movement in broadly rational terms. It is just that my conception of rationality has a more collectivist and solidaristic cast to it than does the traditional rational actor models.

**Implications for Prediction in the Study of Movement Origins** - The emergence of any major social movement or revolution invariably triggers several rounds of recrimination in which the relevant scholarly community is taken to task (or takes itself to task) for failing to accurately predict the latest "moment of madness." Since I believe the theoretical reformulation outlined here bears on this issue, I want to close by sketching what I see as the realistic prospects for and decided limits on prediction in the study of social movements or contentious politics more generally.

In 1995 the *American Journal of Sociology* published a symposium on "Prediction in the Social Sciences." In his introduction to the symposium, Michael Hechter (1995: 1526) summarized what he saw as the unifying consensus to the otherwise disparate contributions to the volume. "Altogether," he wrote, "this symposium suggests that our situation with respect to prediction is akin to that in seismology. There is reason to believe that it is possible to predict the location of major social upheavals....Predicting their timing is likely to be beyond our grasp both now and in the future." The theoretical reformulation offered here prompts me to concur with this consensus, though for reasons quite different from some of the contributors to the aforementioned symposium (e.g. Collins, 1995; Kuran, 1995; Tilly, 1995).

For me, both the possibilities and limits of prediction are bound up with the critically important, but complex, relationship between *constituted* and *constitutive contention*. I think the former phenomenon may be amenable to prediction with at least some degree of temporal accuracy. Prediction in such cases would depend on being able to specify two variables for each of the major actors who comprise whatever system of institutionalized power the analyst is

concerned with. The two variables would be: (1) the actor's major interests, and; (2) their perception of the significance (either as "threat" or "opportunity") of any given exogenous shock in relation to those interests. Knowing, for example, the major foreign policy objectives of the U.S. in the post-World War II period, it would not have been farfetched for an astute social analyst to predict that certain federal officials would have begun to push for changes in civil rights policy. Indeed, as quoted earlier, Gunnar Myrdal published just such a prediction as early as 1944. In turn, knowing the central importance the southern political elite attached to the maintenance of Jim Crow in this same era, one could easily have predicted what their general response to any significant shift in federal civil rights policy would have been. By aggregating these specifications of interests and perceptions across the major parties to a given system or issue, I think it quite possible to predict–at least probabilistically–the onset of a period of *constituted contention*. But the kind of major social upheavals that were the subject of the *AJS* symposium are only associated with *constitutive contention*, or that phase of contention marked by the mobilization of previously latent or unorganized challengers. Still, the ability to predict instances of *constituted contention* takes on added significance if one believes, as I have come to, that the great majority of episodes of *constitutive contention* grow out of or depend for their impact on the existence of the former kind of conflict.

So far so good. Alas, we have reached, in my view, the limits of our predictive prospects. To reinvoke Michael Hechter's seismology analogy, noting the close connection between instances of *constituted* and *constitutive contention* may allow us to say which political systems are vulnerable to significant social movements or revolutions, but not exactly when or where these broader "social upheavals" will occur, or even if, in fact, they will. In trying to predict episodes of *constitutive contention* from instances of *constituted* conflict, one confronts the difficulty touched on in the earlier discussion of the general irrelevance of rational actor models to an understanding of the mobilization of new challengers. Since the mobilization of previously latent or non-political groups invariably turns on the social construction of new interests or new lines of innovative action linked unexpectedly to old interests, there is simply no way to predict where or when these critically important conflict-transforming mobilizations are going to take place. So knowing in 1950 that we were in a period of *constituted contention* regarding issues of race might have emboldened one to predict that the struggle would ultimately spread beyond the roster of

established parties to the conflict, but I cannot imagine how, from that temporal vantage point, anyone could have asserted that the critical transformation of the conflict would have come in Montgomery in December of 1955. Only a post-hoc culturalist reading of several temporal strands of events unfolding in Montgomery in the years leading up to the Boycott and in the days immediately following the arrest of Rosa Parks could tell us how and why Montgomery emerged as the major cite of contention it did. This last point serves to underscore the central point of the entire Introduction; that unless we combine structuralist, culturalist and rationalist tenets with insights gained from the study of other forms of contention, we cannot hope to develop anything close to a complete understanding of the origins of social movements. The elaborated framework proposed here has sought to incorporate all of these influences.

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**Endnotes**

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2. The issue of authorship bears mention. Many of the ideas expressed in the Introduction were worked out during the course of an ongoing collaboration with Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly. In this sense, the piece would not have been written were it not for the sustained conversations and generous intellectual contributions of these two exceptional colleagues.

3. A seventh *major* weakness afflicts the study of political contention generally and not simply the narrow literature on social movement origins. I refer to the overly cognitive/rationalist bias inherent in the study of most forms of contention. The role of emotions in mobilizing and sustaining collective action is only now starting to be addressed by scholars (Goodwin, 1997; Jasper, 1997; Taylor, 1995, 1996). The breadth and significance of this topic has prompted me to steer clear of it here. Instead Ron Aminzade and I have chosen to write extensively on the topic

for a forthcoming volume on *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics*. To convey the flavor of the perspective we seek to develop, and to underscore the explanatory importance we assign to emotions in political contention, let me offer the following quote from our chapter:

> We want to make two strong.....claims about the explanatory significance of emotions and emotional processes as they relate to the emergence, development, and decline of social movements and revolutions.....At the aggregate level, we think the onset of an episode of contention is associated with, and partially dependent upon, the collective mobilization of heightened emotion.....The second claim concerns the role of emotions in motivating individual activism. Much has been made in the literature of the daunting "free-rider" problem.....[B]ut, in our view.....the formulation ignores the power of emotions to shape both the assessment of potential gains and costs involved in any line of action....and to motivate action, even in the face of extreme risks and seemingly no hope for pay-off.

4. For a few partial exceptions to this rule, see: Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994; Gould, 1995; McAdam and Paulsen, 1993; Opp, 1989.

5. In recent years there has developed a more "bottom-up" culturalist approach to the study of revolution that does pay serious attention to the kinds of interpretive processes under discussion here. Proponents of this perspective would include: Goodwin (1994), Hunt (1984), McDaniel (1991), and Sewell (1990,1996), among others.

6. But for exceptions, see Klandermans, 1984, 1997; Klandermans and Oegema, 1987; and Rochon, 1998.

7. In her account of the rise of "public interest science organizations" in the U.S. in the 1950s and 1960s (1996), Kelly Moore provides an especially rich and detailed example of what I am here calling *social appropriation*.

8. Jack Goldstone (1991) has advanced a similar argument about the relationship between state crisis and the development and adoption of innovative cultural framings.