

# Culture, Power, and Institutions: A Multi-Institutional Politics Approach to Social Movements\*

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*We argue that critiques of political process theory are beginning to coalesce into a new approach to social movements—a “multi-institutional politics” approach. While the political process model assumes that domination is organized by and around one source of power, the alternative perspective views domination as organized around multiple sources of power, each of which is simultaneously material and symbolic. We examine the conceptions of social movements, politics, actors, goals, and strategies supported by each model, demonstrating that the view of society and power underlying the political process model is too narrow to encompass the diversity of contemporary change efforts. Through empirical examples, we demonstrate that the alternative approach provides powerful analytical tools for the analysis of a wide variety of contemporary change efforts.*

Over the past decade, social movement scholars have challenged the dominant political process approach to social movements (McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1994; Tilly 1978). Some of the primary critiques revolve around the definition and identification of political opportunity, the state-centeredness that marginalizes some social movements, and ignoring or misunderstanding the relationship between culture, identity, and structure in movements (Buechler 1993; Downey 1986; Goodwin and Jasper 1999; Jasper and Goodwin 1999; Johnston and Klandermans 1995; Polletta 1994, 1998, 1999, 2002, 2004; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Taylor and Whittier 1992). This collective process of theoretical reconstruction has been highly productive, and is on the cusp of generating an alternative approach to the study of social movements.

In this article, we distill the central concepts and propositions of this new approach—what we call a multi-institutional politics approach to social movements—and link those concepts to developments in contemporary social theory. We argue that the political process model assumed that domination was organized by and around one source of power, that political and economic structures of society were primary and determining, and that culture was separate from structure and secondary in importance. The research we build on implicitly challenges these assumptions. The

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alternative perspective that we present views domination as organized around multiple sources of power, each of which is simultaneously material and symbolic. These competing views of society and power have implications for the study of social movements, including: the definition of the object of study, who is expected to participate, and what strategies and goals are intelligible. We examine each of the assumptions and implications in turn as they pertain to the political process approach, and then outline the comparison with the new paradigm. Last, we draw on empirical examples in order to synthesize some of the core ideas that underlie this new approach to social movements. We suggest that making the assumptions about power and society allows for a more complete understanding of social movements, and opens new directions for future social movement scholarship.

### SOCIETY AND POWER IN POLITICAL PROCESS AND CONTENTIOUS POLITICS APPROACHES

Although political process theory has been widely critiqued in social movement scholarship, few have noted that the way it defines the object of study—the social movement—is rooted in fundamental assumptions about the nature of society and the operation of power. In *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency*, McAdam (1982:36) argued that “theories of social movements always imply a more general model of institutionalized power.” In this section we highlight the theory of society and power underlying political process and contentious politics approaches, and argue that it generates conceptions of social movements, politics, actors, goals, and strategies too narrow to encompass the diversity of contemporary change efforts.

In *Political Process*, McAdam (1982:37) argued that society is dominated by elites, with subordinate groups holding leverage stemming from their “location in various politico-economic structures.” This view of society assumes that domination is organized by and around one central source of power—the state. The view of society and power is, at root, a modified Marxist view. Economic and political subordination are viewed as closely tied; economic disenfranchisement is accomplished through political disenfranchisement. Governments are viewed as the only rulemakers of significance, and actors are defined in terms of their relationship to the state. Thus “members” of and “challengers” to the polity become the relevant actors in social movement struggles (Tilly 1978). Political and economic structures of society are viewed as determining, while culture is treated as separate from structure and secondary in importance.<sup>1</sup> This approach has recently been refined by the original architects of the theory in *Dynamics of Contention* (McAdam et al. 2001) in order to address critiques of political process theory. However, as we argue below, the core assumptions about the nature of society and power that define the original approach remain largely intact. These underlying assumptions have implications for conceptualizations of social movements, politics, social movement actors, goals, and strategies. Table 1 summarizes the assumptions about society and power of both perspectives, and their implications for the study of social movements.

#### *Implications for the Study of Social Movements*

**Definition of Social Movement.** The polity model that underlies political process perspectives suggests that nonpolity members have reason to mobilize as they do not

<sup>1</sup> See Sewell (1992) for a critique of this way of envisioning the relationship between culture and structure.

Table 1. Comparing Political Process and Multi-Institutional Politics Perspectives

	Political Process	Multi-Institutional Politics
Model of society and power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Domination organized around the state</li> <li>b. Culture as secondary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Domination organized around the state, other institutions, and culture</li> <li>b. Culture as constitutive</li> </ul>
Definition of social movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. State as target</li> <li>b. Seeks policy change, new benefits, or inclusion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. State, other institutions, and/or culture as targets</li> <li>b. Seeks policy change, new benefits, inclusion, cultural change, or changes in the rules of the game</li> </ul>
Definition of politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Related to governance, formal political arena</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Related to power, as it manifests itself in the state, other institutions, or culture</li> </ul>
Social movement actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Those excluded from the polity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Those disadvantaged by rules organizing any institution</li> <li>b. Distinction between members and challengers breaks down</li> <li>c. Actors constituted in part by the institution(s) challenged</li> </ul>
Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Seeks policy change, new benefits, or inclusion</li> <li>b. Grievances taken-for-granted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Seeks material and symbolic change in institutions or culture; identity may be a goal</li> <li>b. Grievances in need of explanation</li> </ul>
Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Outside of conventional political channels</li> <li>b. Considered “instrumental” if seeking policy change, “expressive” if seeking cultural change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Depends on logic of institutions: domination reinforced by multiple institutions is difficult to challenge, and institutional contradictions can be exploited</li> <li>b. Instrumental/expressive distinction irrelevant</li> </ul>
Key research questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Under what conditions do challenges originate, survive, and succeed?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Why do challenges take the forms that they do? What does the interaction between challengers and target tell us about the nature of domination in society? Under what conditions do challenges originate, survive, and succeed?</li> </ul>

have routine access to government agents or resources. McAdam (1982:20) defined social movements as “rational attempts by excluded groups to mobilize sufficient political leverage to advance collective interests through noninstitutionalized means.”<sup>2</sup> Movements target the state to seek new benefits for a constituency or recognition by authorities (Gamson [1975] 1990). Only those change efforts initiated by the powerless to redress political inequality fully qualify as social movements in this framework. Within this perspective, the more directly a movement seeks to change state policy, the more intelligible it is.

The focus on the state is even more explicit in *Dynamics*, in which McAdam et al. (2001:10–11) refer to the model of society they deploy as the *polity model*.<sup>3</sup> “Contentious politics” is defined as the “episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants” (McAdam et al. 2001:5). Elsewhere, Tilly (2004b:3) reiterates this definition, explaining that collective action cannot be considered “political” or part of a social movement unless “a government of one sort or another figure[s] somehow in the claim[s] making.” Similarly, Della Porta et al. (2004) use the term “transnational activism” instead of “social movements” to refer to protest that crosses national boundaries because they view targeting a state as fundamental to the definition of social movements.

**Definition of Politics.** Political process and contentious politics views of society generate a narrow definition of “politics.” To qualify as political, activity must be related to formal governance by nation-states. Collective action is not considered political unless it targets the state. Politics may involve institutionalized activity such as voting or lobbying, or informal activity such as marches or rallies. Politics is not conceived of as a general social process occurring in multiple arenas of society.

**Social Movement Actors.** A state-centered view of power suggests that those inside and outside of the polity are mutually exclusive and thus can be readily distinguished. Only those who are economically and politically disadvantaged in relationship to the state are expected to participate in movements. Collective identity formation is not typically viewed as particularly interesting because movements are expected to coalesce around core societal cleavages, long-standing grievances, and existing identities.

**Goals.** Movements seek to improve the situation of their constituencies by gaining access to the polity or achieving changes in laws or social policies. Cultural change is generally viewed as secondary to policy change, and is thought to be a byproduct of change in policy. For example, McAdam (1994) expected that “the cultural impact of a movement will be commensurate with the substantive political and economic success it achieves” (1994:52).

**Strategies.** Because social movements are, by definition, composed of those excluded from conventional political channels, noninstitutionalized means are often the only way to influence decision making. Social movements are expected to select strategies

<sup>2</sup>See also Jenkins (1985).

<sup>3</sup>We disagree with Kjelstadli (2004) who contends that *Dynamics* provides no theory of society. For evidence of continuity in basic assumptions, see also Tilly (2004b).

most likely to generate policy changes.<sup>4</sup> Meyer and Staggenborg (1996:1647) argue that “activists seek the most direct means toward influence on policy, based on their socially constructed appraisals of their resources and social and political location.” Strategies directly linked to efforts to change policy are viewed by social movement scholars as “instrumental.” Other strategies, such as building movement solidarity or affirming identities, are defined as “expressive” (Jenkins 1983).

*Awkward Movements and the Critique of the Political Process Model*

The extent and quality of scholarship employing the political process approach serves as a testament to its analytical power. But not long after the paradigm crystallized, scholars began to observe “awkward” social movements, phenomena that looked like social movements, but did not make sense within the categories of the political process approach (Polletta 2006). As Melucci (1996:3) noted: “The increasing diffusion of these phenomena and their diversification is, paradoxically, matched by the inadequacy of the analytical tools available to us.” In this section, we describe ways that contemporary movements confound political process and contentious politics definitions of social movements and politics, and the resulting expectations about appropriate actors, goals, and strategies.

**Definition of Social Movement.** Many post-1960s social movements—such as environmental, women’s, and lesbian/gay movements—targeted civil society as well as the state and pursued “cultural” as well as “political” goals (Cohen 1993; Duyvendak and Giugni 1995; Inglehart 1977, 1981, 1990; Melucci 1985, 1989; Pichardo 1997; Staggenborg and Taylor 2005; Touraine 1981). Arenas of civil society challenged have included medicine, religion, education, science, the workplace, and labor unions (Bartley 2003; Binder 2002; Moore 1999; Morrill et al. 2003; Rojas 2007; Seidman 2003; Stevens 2001; Taylor 1996; Voss and Sherman 2000; Wilde 2004; Zald and Berger 1978). Recent work on the intersection of social movements and organizational sociology emphasizes the increasing importance of the corporation as a target. Davis and Zald (2005:336) suggest that, “as corporations have become increasingly multinational and encompassing, they have taken on the character of politics whose ‘citizens’ may engage in collective action to challenge policies with which they disagree.”

A number of movements, such as the Latin American movements analyzed by Hellman (1995), target both the state and civil society.<sup>5</sup> Davis (1999) points out that a Western bias plagues the political process model of the state. Davis argues that state power is uneven in Latin America and nonstate actors often wield power that might be held by the state in the West. Kenney (2001) argues that political process models assume a liberal democratic state and do not translate easily to repressive regimes.<sup>6</sup>

**Definition of Politics.** The narrow definition of politics supported by the political process model (as only activity occurring in reference to the governments of

<sup>4</sup>See Chapters 2 and 3 of McAdam (1982) and Chapter 1 of Jenkins (1985).

<sup>5</sup>See also Davis (1999).

<sup>6</sup>Kenney (2001) tries to rescue political process models by contending that the absence of opportunities can be overcome if activists frame the closing of opportunities as an opportunity. In our view, this claim renders opportunities irrelevant as predictors of social movement activity, thus undermining the utility of political process perspectives.

nation-states) defines much social movement activity as nonpolitical. Evaluations of the “political-ness” of phenomena have tended to be associated with judgments about the legitimacy of the phenomena as objects of study. Some scholars dismiss the movements themselves as unimportant and misguided (Bickford 1997; Rorty 1998; Walzer 1996). For example, Gitlin (1995) accuses the movement for multicultural school curricula of distracting attention from significant economic and political issues. Movements that challenge cultural (as well as material) systems of oppression and authority—such as the women’s and lesbian/gay movements—have often been dismissed as mere “identity politics” in contrast to the “real” politics of state-oriented activism (Bernstein 2005a). The activities of many contemporary movements do not fit neatly within a narrow definition of politics.

**Social Movement Actors.** Contemporary movements not only target the “wrong” institutions, but some are also composed of the “wrong” people. Environmental, gay, and women’s movements, for example, are composed primarily of middle-class white people (Epstein 1996; Evans 1979; Rose 1997). These people are not disenfranchised in the economic and political realms in the ways envisaged by political process perspectives. Further complicating the story, recent scholarship suggests that institutional insiders, such as feminists within the Catholic Church, often play a central role in movements (Katzenstein 1998).<sup>7</sup> This view of actors also ignores actors within the state who may be as much challengers as members (Skrentny 2002; Santoro and McGuire 1997).

**Goals.** One of the more puzzling aspects of “new” social movements has been a focus on cultural change, particularly when not associated with efforts to change governmental policy or to seek inclusion in the polity. Environmental, women’s, and gay movements have focused particular attention on changing culture. Cultural goals make little sense within the political process perspective.

**Strategies.** Political process theory leads researchers to expect activists to use the most direct means available to achieve policy change or inclusion within institutions. Actors are expected to use institutional channels when available, and to engage in strategies that pose a direct challenge to the target. However, there is nothing obvious about what strategies will be the most effective in a given situation. As Breines (1989), Polletta (2002), and others have observed, sometimes activists reject effective organizational strategies on ideological grounds. Activists participating in movements such as civil rights, the New Left, and women’s liberation saw the movement communities they formed as “prefiguring” the just societies they hoped to create. They sometimes rejected organizational forms viewed as too bureaucratic or ways of proceeding not deemed sufficiently democratic. Activists’ perceptions of the effectiveness of different organizational forms and strategies can be influenced by their association with different groups (Polletta 2002). In other movements, activists sometimes prioritize cultural or mobilization goals, even when they understand that such a choice will likely result in a policy loss (Bernstein 2003). Between 1968 and 1995, the women’s movement challenged nongovernmental organizations more frequently than governmental organizations (Van Dyke, Soule, and Taylor 2004). In sum, the activities of many contemporary movements make little sense within the polity model of society.

<sup>7</sup>See also Binder (2002), Wilde (2004), Moore (1999), and Raeburn (2004).

*The Need for an Alternative*

Scholars studying awkward movements were disappointed that *Dynamics* reproduced a narrow definition of social movements. By privileging movements targeting the state, *Dynamics* reproduced the marginal status of movements that target society, including women's, sexuality, religious, and peace movements (Snow et al. 2004; Taylor 2003; Welskopp 2004).

McAdam et al. defended their definition of contentious politics by asserting that the focus was primarily an issue of "convenience," simply a way of delimiting the frame of the book (Mische and Tilly 2003:90).<sup>8</sup> In their view, the goal of the book was the identification of mechanisms and processes generating contentious politics. They asserted that "most" of the general mechanisms "operate much more widely" (Mische and Tilly 2003:91), and that their approaches could be applied to other forms of collective action (McAdam 2003:127) and challenges to any institutional authority.<sup>9</sup> Tarrow (2003:139), for example, cites the work of Amy Binder (2002) to argue that the contentious politics approach can apply to education reform. Tarrow (2003:139), however, undermines his use of Binder's work as an example of the generalizability of the contentious politics approach by noting that "she identifies some key processes that this DOCTOR [*Dynamics of Contention*-or] should not have missed." This suggests that Binder's work might be read as demonstrating the limitations of the contentious politics formulation. Contentious politics theorists may continue to find "processes" and "mechanisms" ad infinitum as they expand their study to include challenges to nonstate authorities (Koopmans 2003 makes a related claim). Challenges directed at states may not reveal general social processes or mechanisms, but processes and mechanisms that are specific to a particular institution or type of institution. Tilly (Mische and Tilly 2003:91) later noted that "the presence of governments does make a difference. One fact about governments is that they typically have armed forces at their disposal. . . . The presence of arms, militias, thugs, mafias, and so forth alters the stakes and processes of contentious politics." Therefore, at the very least, it is problematic to assume, *a priori*, that the logic of states and governmental power and, consequently, of challenges directed toward them, can be generalized.

Acknowledging that targets matter, and that *Dynamics* did not address challenges to nonstate targets, Tilly (Mische and Tilly 2003:91) "challenge[d] people and ourselves to think more systematically about what difference the presence or absence of force-wielding governments and government-agents makes to the character of the processes." But in order to follow Tilly's advice, we need a model of society and power that renders challenges to nonstate institutions comprehensible. While *Dynamics* provides insights into mechanisms and processes—the *how* of collective action—we need a different starting point to account for the targets, motivations, strategies, and goals of contemporary movements. *Dynamics*, by intent, was not concerned with actor motivations or consciousness (Mische and Tilly 2003). This is perhaps because motivations—the *why* of collective action—is largely assumed within the polity model: of course, people who are politically disenfranchised want to challenge the state to improve their situation. But once one observes that movements do not all operate within a single polity, target one state, or seek policy change, questions about why actors make the decisions they do about targets, goals, and strategies become

<sup>8</sup>See McAdam (2003) and Tarrow (2003) for other responses to critiques of *Dynamics*.

<sup>9</sup>See also pp. 342–43 of *Dynamics*, and Tilly's rebuttal to a review symposium on *Dynamics* in the *International Review of Social History* (2004a).

more interesting. We must look to other intellectual traditions for tools to aid us in thinking about the implications of the nature of power in contemporary societies for social movements. As Crossley (2002:170) observes, the political process model assumes “that the activities of social movements, their struggles, take shape in a single and unified space, ‘the polity’, failing to address properly the differentiated nature of contemporary societies and the plurality of distinct spaces in which struggles are waged.”

### THE NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENT ALTERNATIVE

European new social movement theory offers alternatives to the political process model. In contrast to the American focus on processes of mobilization, it has privileged questions of motivation (Crossley 2002; Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Melucci 1985). Despite attempts to synthesize American and European approaches (e.g., Klandermans et al. 1988), the European tradition remains distinct from the political process tradition. For example, *Dynamics* references not a single work by Bourdieu, Foucault, Melucci, Touraine, Cohen, or Habermas. Tilly (Mische and Tilly 2003) admitted that this omission was deliberate. The authors of *Dynamics* view NSM theory as overly concerned with actor perceptions, and reject “the notion that the final explanations or deep explanations of social processes are the intentions, awareness, phenomenology, consciousness, motives, urges, or individual actors, or, for that matter, even collective actors” (Mische and Tilly 2003:91). This lack of interest in actor perceptions is related to a lack of interest in “grievances,” and in connections between forms of domination and forms of movement. Political process theory assumes that the primary forms of cleavages within society are obviously related to political and economic structures and thus actor motivation to challenge those forms of domination requires little theorizing. In contrast, as Crossley (2002) points out, “European debates have typically been as much about the constitutive structure and type of society in which modern movements emerge, the relation of those movements to that society and their ‘historical role’ therein” (2002:10).

NSM theorists argued that post-1960s movements such as peace, environmental, youth, and anti-nuclear movements were a response to macrostructural changes in society, particularly the shift to a postindustrial society (Cohen 1985; Inglehart 1977; Melucci 1985, 1989; Touraine 1981). The claims of these theorists were bold; Touraine (1981) hoped to identify *the* nature of contemporary society, what he referred to as its “historicity,” and *the* single core movement defining of a new social order. These bold claims did not hold up well when dissected by empirically oriented social movement scholars (Calhoun 1994; Pichardo 1997; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Young 2002). Nonetheless, NSM theory provides an important corrective to political process approaches by centering inquiry on the nature of domination in society and on the relationship between forms of domination and social movement challenges.

### SOCIETY AND POWER IN A MULTI-INSTITUTIONAL POLITICS APPROACH

In this section we outline an alternative model of society and power, and develop its implications for conceptions of social movements, politics, actors, goals, and strategies (see Table 1). Like European NSM theorists, we argue that study of the relationship between forms of domination and forms of challenge should be central to the study of movements. But in contrast to NSM theory, we do not make assertions about the



“newness” of particular movements, the historical trajectory of societies, or about a tight relationship between society types and movement types. We are certainly not attempting to identify a single core fault line defining the contemporary era. Instead, our approach offers the theoretical tools with which to investigate the shifting nature of domination (both material and cultural) in both governmental and nongovernmental institutions and collective efforts that arise in response to different types of domination.

In the multi-institutional politics model, the investigation of the goals and strategies of movements are opportunities for insight into the nature of domination in contemporary societies. In this way, we reject the implicit neo-Marxism of political process approaches, which ultimately privileges politics occurring in relation to states, and endorses the position that “real” movements are only those that directly address economic and political disenfranchisement. Our definitions of social movements and politics are broader than those espoused by political process theorists. We view culture as a powerful, constraining force, instead of as secondary or epiphenomenal. Challenges to culture are viewed as being difficult and consequential, rather than as a distraction from real efforts to accomplish change. We develop the theoretical grounding of this perspective in more detail below.

### *Society as a Multi-Institutional System*

In contrast to the polity model, we argue that society is composed of multiple and often contradictory institutions. This view of society is articulated in institutional, feminist, and cultural theory (Collins 1990; Fligstein 1997; Sewell 1992). For example, Friedland and Alford (1991:232) describe society as “multi-institutional,” and assert that the “capitalist market, bureaucratic state, democracy, nuclear family, and Christian religion” are the “central institutions of the contemporary capitalist West.” Smith (1987, 1990, 1999) develops the concept of “relations of ruling” to describe the ways in which the intersections among societal institutions reproduce power relations in society. We refrain from making *a priori* assumptions about which institutions will be most important, their logics, and the particular ways in which they are interconnected.

Within social movement theory, this view of society is most explicitly developed by Crossley (2002). Drawing on Bourdieu, Crossley (2002) views the social world as “differentiated into specific ‘fields’, each of which is a game in which suitably disposed agents engage, in accordance with their forms of ‘capital’ and their ‘feel for the game’” (2002:182). While understanding that both “field” and “institution” are complex concepts, we, like Fligstein (2001), treat them as roughly interchangeable. Institutions, within this perspective, operate according to distinct logics or “organizing principles” (Friedland and Alford 1991:248). Institutions are composed not only of rules, but they are also “organizationally structured, politically defended, and technically and materially constrained” (Friedland and Alford 1991:248).

### *The Role of the State*

The multi-institutional politics model views institutions as overlapping and nested. The state is typically important, as states generally establish rules that govern other institutions of society (Fligstein 1991; Fligstein and McAdam 1995; Moore 1999; Polletta 2004). However, our model views the nature, power, logic, and centrality of states as historically variable and a question for empirical investigation. We do not take for granted the nature of and importance of states.

*Institutions as Material and Symbolic*

In contrast to the polity model, which sees culture as secondary and derivative of structure, we treat meaning as constitutive of structure (Polletta 2002, 2004; Williams 2004). Institutions are mutually constituted by classificatory systems and practices that concretize these systems (Friedland and Alford 1991). This conceptualization of the relationship between the material and the symbolic is indebted to contemporary social and cultural theory, which has worked to “overcome the divide between semiotic and materialist visions of structure” (Sewell 1992:4).<sup>10</sup>

Contemporary efforts to move beyond the divide between the semiotic and the material owe a great deal to the theorizing of Foucault and Bourdieu. Distinctions have material consequences: they determine how people are treated, the allocation of resources, and forms of regulation. Foucault’s treatment of the prison and the asylum shows how ways of classifying the criminal and the insane are inextricably interconnected with new technologies of the body (Foucault 1965, 1977). By subjecting bodies to particular social practices, the kinds of people categories presuppose are produced. For example, we treat newborns as if they were really boys or girls and even surgically alter those infants for whom “sex” is not clear (Kessler 1990). Activities of “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) recreate gender categories. The gendered treatment of children is systematic, as Martin (1998) describes in her study of preschools. This ongoing creation of people who fit into categories serves as evidence of the naturalness of the classification system, and thus justifies further subjection of individuals to the practices creating the inhabitants of the categories (Foucault 1978; Valocchi 1999).

When categories become concretized in bodies, reproduced through social practices, solidified in buildings, and embedded in systems for the allocation of rewards and punishments, culture becomes both formidably powerful and, ironically, “nearly invisible” (Swidler 2001:19). Classification systems embedded within institutions influence access to resources in ways that affect one’s life chances (Lamont and Volnar 2002:169). Valocchi (2005) states that “[i]ndividuals internalize the norms generated by the discourses of [for example] sexuality and gender as they are circulated by social institutions such as schools, clinics, mass media, and even social movements. In so doing, individuals become self-regulating subjects” (2005:756). As Seidman (1993:135) reminds us, cultural codes cannot be reduced solely to texts, nor should they be abstracted from concrete institutional locations. Institutions have both material and social power. Thus, institutions are where distinctions made by individual social actors are translated into social boundaries, where classification systems are anchored and infused with material consequences.

Meanings, while anchored by institutions, are not reducible to institutions. Sewell (1996) explains: “The meaning of a symbol always transcends any particular context, because the symbol is freighted with its usages in a multitude of other instances of social practice. . . . A given symbol—mother, red, polyester, liberty, wage labor, or dirt—is likely to show up not only in many different locations in a particular institutional domain . . . but in a variety of different institutional domains as well” (1996:48). Social change is thus enabled by the multiplicity of available cultural meanings (Sewell 1992). Meaning systems constrain and enable action, and are targets for change efforts (Williams 2004).

<sup>10</sup>See also Archer (1988), Bourdieu (1977), Emirbayer and Goodwin (1994), Foucault (1978), Giddens (1981, 1984), Mohr and Duquenne (1977), Sewell (1996), Swidler (1986, 2001).

*Implications for the Study of Social Movements*

Assumptions about society have implications for scholarship. Not only do assumptions influence our view of what counts as a social movement and consequently what we choose to study, they also influence the empirical descriptions we produce, the questions we ask, and the explanations we construct. Making these assumptions explicit reveals theoretical commonalities linking a diverse range of current scholarship and provides theoretical tools that enrich this research. Below, we discuss implications of a multi-institutional politics approach for the definition of social movements, politics, social movement actors, goals, and strategies (see Table 1).

**Definition of Social Movement.** The view of society as a multi-institutional system leads us to expect challenges to any or all of the major institutions of society. Movements may target the state, other institutions, or cultural meanings. Snow (2004:11) provides a definition of social movements that incorporates the elements we see as critical: social movements are “collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based, in the group, organization, society, culture, or world order of which they are a part.” Snow’s definition recognizes that the state is not the only source of authority and that, consequently, social movements target other institutions and more diffuse cultural meanings.<sup>11</sup> Others who have proffered similarly inclusive definitions of social movements include Blumer (1964), Eyerman and Jamison (1991:4), Melucci (1996), Katzenstein (1998:7), Della Porta and Diani (1999), and Crossley (2002:2–7). This definition of social movements excludes action that is not collective (e.g., individual mobility projects) and action reproducing “the rules of the game in a particular arena” (e.g., voting, lobbying) (Armstrong 2002b:11). We do not offer a new definition of the term “social movement,” but instead articulate a view of society and power that theoretically justifies these more inclusive definitions.

**Definition of Politics.** The model of society and power proposed here has implications for the definition of politics. It suggests that the narrow definition of politics supported by the political process model conceals many efforts to challenge the operation of power in society. To arbitrarily mark the state as the only institution of importance fails to capture the ways that power is distributed in society and cannot capture the range of activity designed to challenge the ways that power operates (e.g., Bookman and Morgan 1988; Naples 1998; Stout 1996). Thus we define all collective challenges to constituted authority as political. We recognize that action in reference to governments has distinct characteristics stemming from the nature and logic of the state.

Our view of power and politics borrows from Foucault (1980), who argued that “power isn’t localized in the State apparatus and that nothing in society will be changed if the mechanisms of power that function outside, below and alongside the State apparatuses, on a much more minute and everyday level, are not also changed” (1980:60). Viewing meaning as constitutive of structure means that political activity concerns both changes in classification and in allocation, that is, changes in rules

<sup>11</sup>While we adopt Snow’s (2004) definition of a social movement, we go further than Snow by theorizing a theory of society and power that can support this definition and by outlining the implications of such a definition for social movement theory.

and changes in the distribution of resources. Governments, like other institutions, are constituted by both rules and resources. The state is as important for its role in establishing and supporting systems of meaning and classification as it is for its role in the allocation of resources (Bourdieu 1994). Challenges to the state also involve challenges to meaning systems, and are thus no more or less cultural than challenges within other spheres.

**Actors.** In most contemporary societies, just about everyone is a potential social movement participant, as most people could generate plausible grounds for challenging some institution. The categories around which movements form are not natural, but politically and historically produced. Institutional arrangements establish the possible array of actors for whom collective action is thinkable. Institutions (state and nonstate) structure both who can produce claims and how those claims can be made (Naples 1997; Smith 1987, 1990). For example, Andersen (2005) illustrates the ways in which the law structures who can make claims and how this changes over time. This theoretical perspective justifies the long-standing position among some scholars that social movement scholarship should not only explain how preexisting actors move from placidity to action, but should account for the creation of activist subjects (Bernstein 1997; D'Emilio 1983; Epstein 1996; Gamson 1989, [1995] 1998; Goodwin and Jasper 1999; Goodwin et al. 2001; Jasper 1997; Jasper and Goodwin 1999; Polletta 1998, 1999, 2004; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Taylor and Whittier 1992; Valocchi 1999). For example, a gay movement is unthinkable in societies lacking gay identity. Without a category for a gay person, a movement advocating for the rights of such persons makes little sense. This theoretical perspective justifies social movement scholarship on the formation of collective identity (Gamson [1995] 1998; Goodwin et al. 2001; Jasper 1997; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Taylor and Whittier 1992). In recent years scholars have produced an extensive body of scholarship on the creation of lesbian and gay identities (D'Emilio 1983; Epstein 1987; Escoffier 1985; Stein 1997, 2000; Valocchi 1999).

The multi-institutional politics model also suggests that the extent to which the member/challenger divide is a useful distinction will vary historically and across both institutions and change efforts. Challenges are more likely to succeed if activists have a “feel for the game.” Challengers are often members, customers, or clients of the institutions they challenge—individuals structurally linked to the institution in question. True outsiders lack the knowledge needed to identify the vulnerabilities of particular institutions. Insiders are thus expected to play a role in challenges, either through initiating challenges or providing resources and information to external challengers (Binder 2002; Katzenstein 1998; Moore 1999; Polletta 2004). Those with the best “feel for the game” should be able to navigate the arena successfully and have little interest in challenging the rules of the game. Thus, it is not surprising that some researchers have found that change is often initiated by those who are simultaneously insiders and outsiders (Epstein 1996; Wilde 2004).

**Goals.** The notion that institutions are simultaneously material and symbolic has implications for how to think about movement goals. Most movements demand changes in both meanings and resources, although sometimes they prioritize one more than the other. We suggest that scholars abandon efforts to classify whole movements, or even particular movement goals, as “expressive” or “instrumental” (e.g., Cohen 1985; Duyvendak and Giugni 1995). Instead, scholars might examine the ways in which challenges that appear to be primarily about distribution are also over social honor,

and the ways in which contestations over meaning are critical to the fate of struggles over resources.

The interconnectedness of struggles over distribution and classification can be demonstrated by examining contemporary lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) movements. The LGBT movement seeks to expand the rights of people who identify as lesbian or gay, such as by expanding access to the material entitlements of marriage. But the success of such initiatives is also related to the assessment of the social honor and moral worth of lesbians and gay men. Thus, the pursuit of gay rights is generally accompanied by attempts to increase the social status of gays and lesbians.

Struggles over classification may also be struggles over the corporeal practices employed to manage physical bodies. For example, the contemporary intersex movement challenges the ways people are assigned to gender categories. Activists insist that children should be allowed to defer cosmetic genital surgery until they are old enough to decide for themselves based on a personal sense of gender identity. The notion that some children may grow up without a clear gender challenges beliefs that gender categories are binary, mutually exclusive, and unambiguous from birth. But the intersex movement also challenges the medical establishment and its authority over medical practices that have life-long bodily consequences for intersexed people. The conventional practice is for doctors, in consultation with parents, to make a judgment and complete genital surgery when children are very young (Turner 1999). Thus, the challenge to medical authority and the challenge to classification are linked.

The interconnectedness of struggles over classification and distribution characterizes all movements, not just women's and LGBT movements. Battles over U.S. welfare policy (Steenland 2006), for example, are about social honor and classification as well as about the allocation of material resources. Stereotypes of welfare mothers are integral to maintaining the current punitive U.S. welfare system (Collins 1990). A challenge to the system of cultural classification is often a precondition to the reallocation of resources, while what initially looks like a simple request to reallocate resources may ultimately threaten to dissolve social boundaries.

A multi-institutional politics perspective helps to make sense of internal contradictions within movements. Because oppression may be distributed among multiple institutions, movements must choose which battles to fight and enemies to target. Because institutions are organized according to different logics, simultaneous challenges may generate internal contradictions in movements. For example, queer activism seeks to eliminate categories based on sexual object choice, while lesbian and gay rights is predicated on providing protection for people defined by those same categories (Epstein 1999; Seidman 1993). Thus identity itself may be a goal of social movement activism (Bernstein 1997, forthcoming), either gaining acceptance for a hitherto stigmatized identity or deconstructing categories of identities such as "man," "woman," "gay," or "straight" (Gamson [1995] 1998).

**Strategies.** Scholars acknowledge that repertoires of contention vary based on historical conditions and internal movement processes (Tarrow 1994; Taylor and Van Dyke 2004; Tilly 1978). The notion that society is composed of institutions with distinct logics suggests that the choice of and effectiveness of strategies will also vary by target. Viewing repertoires of contention as specific to particular institutions complicates distinctions between "noninstitutionalized" and "institutionalized" action. What counts as disruptive will vary based on the institution targeted. For example, Katzenstein (1998:7) found feminist challenges within the Catholic Church

to be effective even though these strategies were “far from lawless, rarely us[ing] civil disobedience, and never resort[ing] to violence. Less lawbreaking than norm-breaking, these feminists have challenged, discomfited, and provoked, unleashing a wholesale disturbance of long-settled assumptions, rules, and practices.” Groups are positioned differently in relation to a field of engagement and have different resources at their disposal.

Viewing society as a multi-institutional system suggests that contradictions among institutions may provide opportunities to push for change (Friedland and Alford 1991; Sewell 1992). Institutional contradictions may appear when the logics or claims of institutions are incommensurate.<sup>12</sup> Social movements might use one institution as a base from which to challenge others, with the first institution providing material and cultural resources to challenge others (Clemens 1997; Clemens and Cook 1999). Movements may be able to shop around for the most vulnerable targets (“venue shopping”) or rapidly switch targets according to perceived chances for success (“forum shifting”), however defined by activists (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Braithwaite and Drahos 2000; Keck and Sikkink 1998).<sup>13</sup> Targeting multiple institutions, while difficult, may increase chances for social change.

Viewing society as a multi-institutional system also suggests that when institutions reinforce each other, change will be difficult. Classification systems—such as gender and racial categories—tend to be supported by multiple institutional arenas of society (i.e., law, medicine, science, media, athletics, religion, family, etc.) (Chauncey 1994; Valocchi 1999). In this case, movements must choose which, among multiple possible institutions, to target.

Relations among institutions are historically and culturally specific. Understanding these relationships becomes particularly important when examining transnational social movements. Recent research in this area posits different possible relationships between nation-states, global institutions, and transnational actors (e.g., Bandy and Smith 2004; Della Porta et al. 2004; Smith and Johnston 2002). Similarly, Davis (1999) argues that social movements in Latin America often ally with the state to challenge nonstate powerholders such as landlords. Some nation-states are more independent of global institutions than others.

### *Summary*

A multi-institutional politics approach moves beyond understanding power as vested primarily in the state. Society is viewed as composed of multiple and contradictory institutions with each institution viewed as mutually constituted by classificatory systems and practices that concretize these systems. Movements may target a diverse array of institutions (both state and nonstate), and seek both material and symbolic change (Fraser 1997).

## EMPIRICAL EXAMPLES

Thus far, we have clarified assumptions about society and power implicit in contemporary social movement theory, and elaborated their implications for the conceptualization of social movements. Here, we provide examples of how a multi-institutional approach can assist in the explanation of social movements. We focus on cases where the tools of the political process approach failed and show how scholars turned to

<sup>12</sup>We owe this insight to one of our reviewers.

<sup>13</sup>Thanks to Tim Bartley for this insight.

other theoretical resources for tools. We conclude each example by showing how clarity about theoretical foundations enables the analysis to be extended.

*Making the Invisible Enemy Visible*

Joshua Gamson's (1989) study of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) set out to explain the activities of AIDS activists in the late 1980s. He described an ACT UP protest at a Mets game in New York, where activists shouted such slogans as "No glove, no love." ACT UP also pushed for "greater access to treatments and drugs for AIDS-related diseases; culturally sensitive, widely available, and explicit safe-sex education"; and research (Gamson 1989:39). ACT UP sought change in governmental and corporate policies, while devoting energies to challenging classification systems and affirming gay identity.

Gamson found that extant American social movement theory did not help him explain why ACT UP chose these strategies. From a political process perspective, ACT UP's strategies appeared puzzling: the target was not only the state and the goal was not only policy change. Gamson turned to European NSM theory and Foucault in order to explain ACT UP's strategies. Drawing on Foucault, Gamson found that asking "who is the enemy?" was key to making sense of ACT UP (1989). According to Gamson:

Examining the forms of domination to which ACT UP members respond, I argue that in addition to visible targets such as government agencies and drug companies, much of what ACT UP is fighting is abstract, disembodied, invisible: control through the creation of abnormality. Power is maintained less through direct force or institutionalized oppression and more through the delineation of the "normal" and the exclusion of the "abnormal." (1989:37)

Thus, in addition to seeking changes in governmental and medical policies, activists chose strategies designed to undermine the categories of identity that structured the government and medical establishment's response to the epidemic in the first place (Epstein 1996).

Gamson's analysis illustrates the need to rethink the nature of society and power in order to make sense of some contemporary social movement strategies. Instead of dismissing ACT UP's theatrical activities as merely expressive, he took these challenges seriously (*Definition of Social Movement*). He recognized that the movement posed political challenges to both state and nonstate institutions, that the state was not the only "enemy" (*Definition of Politics*). AIDS activists were mostly well-educated, white, middle-class men (*Actors*). They were marginalized due to sexual identity (Epstein 1996), a category whose oppression cannot be understood solely through a neo-Marxist understanding of power and oppression.

The pursuit of material benefits and challenges to systems of classification were intimately interconnected (*Goals*). Federal money for AIDS research, prevention, and treatment was in short supply in large part because of the stigma associated with gay identity and sexual practices. Thus, challenging the assessment of gay moral worthiness (and even the category "gay" itself) was connected to successfully arguing for more resources. Strategies varied depending on whether AIDS activists were targeting the FDA or social classification more generally (*Strategy*). For example, to pressure the FDA and the Reagan administration, activists organized "a conference, teach-in, rally, and day of civil disobedience in Washington, D.C." (1989:45). ACT UP

engaged in “conventional protest actions” in the effort to “affect policy decisions” (1989:46). To challenge the cultural association between homosexuality and contamination, ACT UP confronted the makers of a television program about “a bisexual man with AIDS” who intentionally infected women (1989:47). ACT UP targeted the state, the FDA, the medical establishment, the media, and other institutions. ACT UP targeted multiple institutions because of the multisited nature of the forms of domination challenged (*Strategies*).

By clarifying the assumptions of a multi-institutional politics perspective, we extend Gamson’s analysis. Rather than viewing the enemy as free-floating or invisible, we can see heteronormativity as embedded within major institutions. It is the multisited nature of domination that makes it appear so free-floating. Activists did not confront amorphous constructions of abnormality at the baseball game. Rather, they confronted particular, grounded, concrete instantiations of heteronormativity. Targeting the baseball game challenges the practices of everyday life (Messner and Sabo 1994) that produce heteronormativity. By understanding society as a multi-institutional system, the “enemy” no longer appears “abstract, disembodied, invisible,” but concrete, embodied, and visible.

#### *Identity Proliferation as a Response to Multisited Domination*

Armstrong (2002a, 2002b, 2005) set out to explain the proliferation and diversification of LGBT organizations and identities in San Francisco from the 1950s through the 1990s. Like Gamson, she found that existing political process and resource mobilization theory did not account for the activity observed. The organizational proliferation and institutionalization of the LGBT community—evidenced through the creation of annual parades and resource guides—did not register as salient from a political process perspective. She found it difficult to even describe the transformation of the gay movement from within the concepts provided by political process and resource mobilization perspectives. These theories did not explain why commercial institutions such as bars would find it meaningful to participate in social movement protests and parades alongside, for example, employee organizations and democratic clubs.

While Gamson turned to NSM theory and Foucault, Armstrong found that institutional theory offered powerful explanatory tools not available within social movement theory. She found that it was helpful to consider the development of the movement to be a case of the transformation of a field (DiMaggio and Powell [1983] 1991). She found that “defining social movements as collective efforts to create new fields or transform existing fields” freed her to observe the consolidation of a gay identity-building project in the early 1970s (pp. 11–13) (*Definition of Social Movements*). Part of what this new project generated was a new set of “cultural rules producing sexual identities” (p. 13). Thus, she shows how new sets of identities can be a product of social movement action (*Actors*). By looking closely at the political logics guiding movements, she demonstrates that the ways in which actors make sense of the workings of society, the goals of political action, and appropriate strategies to pursue desired ends change over time, sometimes quite suddenly. Strategies and goals are neither obvious nor inevitable, nor can they be read off objective conditions (*Goals*).

Clarifying assumptions about society and power enables us to push Armstrong’s analysis further. Armstrong’s work focuses primarily on processes internal to the movement. We suggest that the proliferation of organizations that Armstrong described is also a response to the regulation of sexuality and gender in the



contemporary United States. Viewing society as a multi-institutional system helps make sense of the plethora of identities and organizations Armstrong described. Many of the organizations exemplified not just *new identities*, but also *new institutional challenges*. By joining the gay pride parade, Gay Lutherans say not only “this is who we are” but also “and, the rest of the year we are trying to make the Lutheran church change its treatment of sexual and gender minorities.” The display of identity in the annual lesbian and gay pride parades signaled the presence of ongoing institutional challenges. Seeing society as a multi-institutional system reveals the confusing variety of identities and organizations as a response to the multisited nature of heteronormativity.

### *Analyzing Alternative Institutional Logics*

Kelly Moore (1999) explains how anti-Vietnam War activists in the 1960s and 1970s managed to change the institution of science. She found that existing theories about the vulnerabilities of states to social movement challenges did not entirely account for the vulnerability of science to activist efforts. Drawing on institutional theory (e.g., Fligstein 1991; Scott 1994), Moore analyzed the ways in which challenges to nonstate institutions differ from challenges to state institutions. She outlined four characteristics determining the “vulnerability” of institutions: rapid organizational growth, the level of centralized control present, the link between clients and professionals, and ties to the state. American science in the 1960s was vulnerable to challenge because of vast post-World War II growth, a highly decentralized structure, and deep dependency on both clients (all Americans) and the state. The challenging actors in this case were activist scientists. These individuals were insiders—participants in the game of science.

Moore’s case study provides another example of a challenge to a nonstate institution (*Definition of Social Movement*). In this case, the activists were not outsiders to the institution of science but were insiders, thus breaking down the member/challenger divide (*Social Movement Actors*). Scientists, who possessed the credentials and knowledge valued by this institution, were uniquely positioned to challenge it. Finally, Moore begins to theorize the relationship between the institution of science and other institutions (*Strategies*).

But by explicitly conceptualizing society as composed of a network of interlocking and often contradictory institutions, we can take Moore’s analysis of the transformation of science even further. This view helps explain the power of the activist scientists, who seemed to be busily importing the logics of other institutions into science. The activists in this case used their simultaneous location in multiple locations (i.e., science, anti-Vietnam War movement, university, etc.) to push for change. Finally, Moore’s framework for analyzing the vulnerability of nonstate institutions provides a useful starting point for comparative studies of nonstate institutions.

### *Institutions as Cultural and Material*

Mary Bernstein (2003, 2005b) set out to explain lesbian and gay strategies aimed at decriminalizing consensual sodomy between adults in private. Bernstein found that political process models could not explain activist strategies that seemed to be working at cross-purposes to achieving policy change. In fact, she found that activists sometimes adopted strategies that they knew would impair the likelihood of legal change. The assumption by political process theory that legal or policy change

would produce cultural change could not explain activists' strategic choices. Rather than simply dismiss these strategies as expressive, Bernstein examined these cases as challenges to culture.

Building on literature in the sociology of law, Bernstein argued that the law is a state institution that must be understood both as an enforcer of rights and obligations as well as a producer of systems of meaning (Stychin 2003). Legal change alone says little about the meaning constructed in the process of interpretation and implementation (Edelman and Suchman 1997). Thus, Bernstein (2001, 2003, 2005b) examined the tension between challenging a cultural system of meaning that denigrates lesbian and gay sexuality and seeking legal change.

Understood through a multi-institutional politics approach, it becomes clear that institutions, even state institutions, are producers of cultural meaning (*Definition of Politics*). This complex relationship between material and cultural goals (*Goals*) poses strategic dilemmas for activists (*Strategy*). Bernstein shows that the repeal of sodomy laws in the 1970s was justified on the grounds that consensual sexual acts between adults in private were victimless crimes and that consenting adults have a right to privacy. However, repeal efforts frequently did not challenge the moral evaluation of homosexuality. As a result, decriminalization alone did not halt repressive police practices. In addition, recent research has found that the repeal of sodomy statutes does not predict the passage of hate crimes legislation (Jenness and Grattet 1996) or lesbian and gay rights ordinances (Button et al. 1996; Haider and Meier 1996), nor do such laws reduce economic disparity between same-sex and different-sex couples (Klawitter and Flatt 1998). The lack of a relationship between other areas of lesbian and gay rights and the repeal of sodomy laws can be explained by looking at *how* the laws were repealed, not just *that* these laws were repealed. While the sodomy statutes were used to discriminate against lesbians and gay men, eliminating these statutes did not end discrimination as the process of eliminating these statutes did not challenge underlying assumptions about the morality of same-sex sexuality.

Viewing the state as an institution that is a producer of meaning as well as laws explains activists' strategic choices in the wake of the 1986 *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision that found no constitutional right to engage in "homosexual" sodomy. Following the decision, activists underscored the importance of the public dimensions of sexuality, that is the right to "own" one's sexuality (whether by holding hands in public or "making out" in a bar), despite its expected deleterious affect on obtaining policy changes. The *Hardwick* decision was a "moral shock" (Jasper 1997) that signified to lesbians and gay men that they were viewed as a separate class of people unworthy of self-respect and citizenship rights. In contrast to the expectations of political process theory that policy change is the primary goal of activists, lesbian and gay organizations responded to the shock of *Hardwick* by shifting their priorities from seeking changes in laws and policies apparent in pre-*Hardwick* activism, to emphasize challenging the system of meaning anchored in the law at the possible expense of achieving political goals. Therefore, even within such conventionally political arenas as the law and the state, power involves not only regulation and the allocation of resources, but also the ability to make meaning.

## CONCLUSION

This article argued that recent scholarship critical of political process theory is beginning to coalesce into a new paradigm for understanding social movements—what we term a multi-institutional politics framework. Our goal was to distill the fundamental

assumptions of this new approach, discuss the implications of these assumptions for social movement research, link these assumptions to recent development in social theory, and illustrate the benefits of making these assumptions clear. Rather than relying on the polity model's state-centered view of power that underlies the political process approach, the multi-institutional politics approach views power as dispersed in a variety of institutions operating according to distinct logics. Institutions are viewed as mutually constituted by classificatory systems and practices, as both material and symbolic. Movements may target a diverse array of institutions (both state and nonstate). Symbolic struggles have material stakes and struggles over distribution are cultural. This view of society and power dissolves the distinctions between instrumental and expressive strategies. A challenge to the system of cultural classification is often a precondition to the reallocation of resources, while what initially looks like a simple request to reallocate resources may ultimately threaten to dissolve social boundaries. This approach understands power as anchored in a variety of institutions, including the state. The importance of the state is neither denied nor assumed *a priori*, but is seen as depending upon historical and cultural context. As a result, the multi-institutional politics model creates new sets of research questions and moves social movement theory beyond political process theory.

The political process model is built upon a theory of how power works in society—not only that power inheres in states, but that state power functions in similar ways across states. But, as we have demonstrated, how power works varies by institution and across states. The logic of states and governmental power and, consequently, of challenges directed toward them, cannot be generalized to nonstate institutions. Even state-oriented movements emerge that cannot easily be accounted for by the factors that are conventionally understood to be “political opportunities.” To the extent that political process theorists take it as their task to explain movements that occur when theory predicts that they should not, they engage in post hoc scrambling to identify changes in the environment that might plausibly be conceived of as a “political opportunity.” This sort of tautological search for political opportunities will not assist in predicting when movements will emerge, nor will it assist in understanding the nature of the institutions targeted.

In contrast, the multi-institutional politics perspective provides theoretical tools that assist in explaining the emergence of a variety of movements. This approach is necessarily general, as the functioning of power is presumed to vary according to the logic of the institution in question, and cannot be assumed *a priori*. In this approach, movement analysts start with an examination of the nature of power—and how activists understand that institutional and cultural power—in specific contexts. For example, religious institutions tend to operate differently than schools. Understanding the logic organizing particular religious or educational systems will yield insights into vulnerabilities likely to be exploited by activists. What counts as disruptive will thus depend on the rules of “doing business” in any given institution. Understanding how institutions are interrelated (e.g., are schools run by churches?) is key because potential activists can often elect to challenge a variety of institutions or to leverage the power of some institutions against other institutions. Understanding power in this way will allow theorists to begin to make some modest generalizations about forms of power and how activists interpret, negotiate, and challenge those forms of power.

The multi-institutional politics approach also offers more specific orienting premises to guide social movement scholarship. First, challenges by those outside of the institution being challenged are expected to be less frequent than challenges by insiders or those with a semi-marginal position (Wilde 2004). Institutions

constitute categories of actors, including those that may pose challenges. The member/challenger distinction of the political process model precludes an understanding of these relationships and therefore hampers an understanding of movement emergence.

Second, this approach centers the study of social movement strategy, while the political process model centers the study of political opportunity (see Lopez 2004). Strategy is of central interest in part because there is not presumed to be any obvious or inevitable relationship between environment and strategy. Additionally, given that institutional contradiction is a feature of many societies, and of the globalizing world, we expect that a great deal of the strategizing of contemporary movements will center on figuring out how to best exploit these contradictions.

Third, we predict that close attention to movement goals will reveal that demands for resource redistribution and challenges to cultural meanings are typically intertwined. And we expect that movements will frequently prioritize cultural and mobilization goals over the pursuit of policy change. As researchers develop better understandings of the logics of institutions being challenged, we should consequently also improve our ability to predict the circumstances under which activists would prioritize one type of goal over the other and why this would shift over time.

A multi-institutional politics approach may be particularly helpful in explaining the rise of new transnational social movements. Examining the role and power of states, other institutions, and relationships among states and other institutions—both supra- and subnational—is of critical importance in the study of these movements (Bandy and Smith 2004; Della Porta et al. 2004; Smith and Johnston 2002). Yet political process theory tends to simply assume the continuing centrality of the nation-state as a target for these movements or to define the challenge as something other than a social movement. The importance of the state in relation to transnational social movements will likely vary across region. The factors that explain the emergence of a social movement in one location may not account for its emergence in another. The multi-institutional politics model offers tools to address the fascinating empirical questions presented by transnational organizing. It allows for the possibility that the polity model does not describe the global political environment.

By suggesting that the organization of domination in society is puzzling rather than known, this perspective suggests new questions about the nature, logic, and organization of power. This new paradigm does not deny the importance of resources and networks for mobilization, nor does it downplay the utility of political process theory for understanding many state-oriented social movements. It does suggest that social movement scholarship focus not only on the nitty-gritty *how* of collective action, but also on *why* social movements exist and what they tell us about the nature of domination in society. The notion that institutional contradictions create opportunities for leverage generates new questions, such as which actors are most likely to be in situations where they are exposed to the competing demands of contradictory institutions, and how do they respond to these stresses? What is the nature of the institutions composing a particular society? What logics organize them? How do they exercise power? What are the modes of regulation and enforcement? How do these institutions affect each other? Which groups can exert influence on which institution? What gives an actor standing to challenge particular institutions? How does variation in the extent of institutional contradiction shape social movement strategies? The result is a research agenda that focuses on how power works across a variety of institutions; how activists interpret, negotiate, and understand power; and how and why activists choose strategies and goals.

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