

## Introduction

On May 30th, 2010, six ships left Turkey and approached the coast of Israel/Palestine to deliver supplies to the coastal enclave of Gaza. Most of the ships were owned by a Turkish NGO called the IHH (İnsani Yardım Vakfı, or Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms).<sup>1</sup> On board were over 600 peace, humanitarian, and pro-Palestinian, anti-Israel activists determined to break the blockade with which, since 2007, Israel had been strangling the economy of Gaza. Approaching the coast, the flotilla was attacked from sea and air by an Israeli commando squadron. When the attack ended, nine activists lay dead or dying, and a number of Israeli commandos were wounded, some of them seriously.

How did this happen, and what does it have to do with “contentious politics”? In 2007, the Gaza Strip, a detached part of the Palestinian territories, was taken over from the more moderate Palestinian governmental party, Fatah, in a bloody coup by the radical Hamas group. From that point on, the Israeli army began to limit access to Gaza, both for fear of arms getting into the hands of Hamas militants, who had been attacking Israeli settlements, and to isolate Hamas, an Islamist group that continued to call for Israel’s destruction. Those measures were not sufficient to prevent home-made missiles from killing Israelis living in towns near the border. Under pressure from public opinion and with an election approaching, in January 2009, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) launched a massive land and air attack on the population of Gaza, destroying thousands of buildings, damaging a UN humanitarian center, and killing over a thousand people.

<sup>1</sup> The IHH describes itself as an Islamic charity that was formed to provide aid to Bosnia in the mid-1990s. It has been involved in aid missions in Africa and Asia and in the Palestinian territories, and it played an important role in provisioning Gaza after the Israeli blockade began in 2007. The IHH is technically an NGO, but it maintains ties with the ruling Islamist Justice and Development Party in Turkey. Its top fundraisers are Turkey’s Islamist merchant class. The organization is banned in Israel. For more information, go to [www.ihh.org.tr/Haber\\_Manset\\_Ayrintilar.160±M5563920baaa.o.html](http://www.ihh.org.tr/Haber_Manset_Ayrintilar.160±M5563920baaa.o.html) (in Turkish).

After the January 2009 “operation,” Israeli pressure became even greater, turning Gaza into a virtual prison for the million-and-a-half Palestinians living there. While Israel allowed in food and medicine, it controlled water and electricity supplies and blocked the entry of anything that could conceivably be used to construct weapons – including fertilizer, metal, and computer chips, as well as a list of nuisance items that included, at one time or another, light bulbs, candles, matches, books, musical instruments, crayons, clothing, coffee, tea, cookies, and shampoo.

The blockade had three major defects: First, it increased the influence of foreign humanitarian groups, including the IHH. Second, it had a devastating impact on Gaza’s economy, increasing the power of Hamas through which almost all foreign aid was distributed. And third, it created a flourishing underground economy and a class of smugglers bringing in supplies through tunnels from Egypt. This led to constant Israeli attacks on the smugglers’ tunnels and to rising tensions between Israel and Egypt. Cut off from the world, unable to get the supplies needed to rebuild their homes, the Gazans relied on the sympathy of fellow Arabs, the United Nations, various humanitarian groups, mainly from Western Europe, and Turkey, since 2002 under the leadership of a moderately Islamist party attempting to better its relations with fellow Muslims in the Middle East.

In January 2010, planning began for the flotilla that would leave Turkey in May to try to challenge the blockade. The IHH “brought large boats and millions of dollars of donations to a cause that had struggled to gain attention and aid the Palestinians. Particularly galling to Israel,” the *New York Times* noted, “is the fact that the group comes from Turkey, an ally, but one whose relations with Israel have become increasingly strained.”<sup>2</sup> Both directly and through its ties with the Turkish government, the Israeli government gave warnings to turn back, but the flotilla’s leaders refused, and on the 31st, a squadron of Israeli warships and helicopter gunships attacked.

The flotilla was not unprepared: When Israeli commandos were lowered onto the ships on ropes from their helicopters, they were at first overwhelmed by well-trained Islamist militants. Several of the Israeli soldiers lost their weapons, which were turned on the attackers. But the numbers and the firepower of the IDF proved too much for the defenders. When the melee ended, nine militants had been killed and a number of Israeli attackers wounded, two of them seriously.

Although the IHH action was deliberately provocative,<sup>3</sup> seldom was there so stark a contrast between the peaceful tactics of a movement and the violent response of its target. Though an Israeli government spokesman painted the activists as “an armada of hate and violence in support of the Hamas terror

<sup>2</sup> *New York Times*, June 1, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> As a board member of the group said, “We became famous; we are very thankful to the Israeli authorities.” *New York Times*, June 1, 2010.

organisation . . . ,”<sup>4</sup> the international press and progressive groups responded with outrage. Predictably, the Arab and Palestinian press were the most violent in their denunciations, but the European press was almost as vehement; the usually conservative *Economist* editorialized, “A policy of trying to imprison the Palestinians has left their jailer strangely besieged.”<sup>5</sup> More surprising, the normally pro-Israeli *New York Times* pronounced that the Israeli blockade must end.<sup>6</sup>

Governments around the world were quick to respond. Denmark, France, Greece, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Egypt, and South Africa all summoned Israeli ambassadors to condemn the attack. Greece suspended joint military exercises, and Turkey withdrew its ambassador and cancelled military cooperation and joint water projects. Leftwing governments, such as Nicaragua’s, suspended diplomatic relations, but even more friendly governments, such as Ireland’s, cancelled an appearance of Israel’s ambassador before a parliamentary committee.<sup>7</sup> Most important, Israel’s only ally, the United States, condemned the violence and called for an end to the boycott of Gaza.

But more striking than the reactions of the press or the politicians was the overwhelming reaction of nonstate actors around the world. Civil society groups, social movements, unions, and religious groups (including some Jewish ones) condemned the attack on the flotilla and organized protests in dozens of cities. In the Arab world, 285 civil society groups signed a statement against the Israeli action; in South Africa, unions called for making every municipality an “Apartheid Israel Free Zone”; in Britain, UNITE called for a policy of divestment in Israeli companies; in Norway, the chair of the largest Norwegian union federation called for divestment by the state’s pension fund; and in Sweden, the port workers’ union called for a boycott of Israeli ships.<sup>8</sup> A number of other groups – including a coalition of European Jews – either immediately launched ships in the direction of Gaza or planned to do so in the near future.

The most widespread response was a call for a boycott.<sup>9</sup> And in the days after the attack, a number of well-known performance artists cancelled their

<sup>4</sup> Statement of Danny Ayalon, Deputy Foreign Minister, on May 31, 2010, quoted in [www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/may/31/q-a-gaza-freedom-flotilla](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/may/31/q-a-gaza-freedom-flotilla). Visited on June 8, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> *The Economist* went on to point out that the attack on a Turkish ship and the killing of nine Turkish citizens (one of them with a U.S. passport as well) “is depriving Israel of a rare Muslim ally and mediator.” *The Economist*, June 5th–11th, 2010, pp. 13–14.

<sup>6</sup> *The Times* criticized the Obama Administration’s tepid response to the attack, urging the government to join other major powers in calling for an end of the blockade. *New York Times*, June 1, 2010. President Obama satisfied himself by characterizing the blockade as “unsustainable.” Visited at [www.nytimes.com/2010/06/02/opinion/02wed1.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/02/opinion/02wed1.html), June 10, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> These selected reactions are reported in “Activism News” on its Web site at [electronicintifada.net/v2/article11318.shtml](http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article11318.shtml). Visited June 7, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> These reports also come from “Activism News,” cited in note no. 7.

<sup>9</sup> The diffusion of the boycott call was remarkable. A simple Google search for “Gaza & boycott” came up with more than one million five hundred thousand “hits.” A narrower search for “Gaza & boycott & unions” produced 568,000. And what I thought would produce only a few “hits” – a search for “Gaza & boycott & artists” – led to 182,000 hits!

appearances in Israel. What had begun as an effort by a radical Islamist group to break a blockade ended in a global wave of negative publicity and a widespread call to boycott Israel, whose leaders refused to cooperate with an international investigation of the killings. But the combination of the brazen attempt to break the blockade, the killing of nine civilians in international waters, and the widespread condemnation of Israel's behavior did have consequences. In the United States, it began to dawn on foreign policy elites that the Israeli alliance was becoming a liability.<sup>10</sup> In the World Zionist Congress, a split occurred between a liberal majority that urged the Israeli government to soften its stand and a vocal minority that attempted to block the majority resolution.<sup>11</sup> And in Israel itself, in late June, the government bowed to international pressure and agreed to soften the blockade.<sup>12</sup>

#### WHAT WAS HAPPENING HERE?

What does the story of the Israeli attack on the Turkish-led "flotilla" tell us? We could interpret it in moral terms, either as the attempt of an intrepid band of missionaries to help their desperate co-religionists, or as the justified attempt of a besieged nation to protect its security. We could see it as an example of how small-power politics can threaten to up-end big-power relationships. We could also see it as an example of what I call "contentious politics" – what happens when collective actors join forces in confrontation with elites, authorities, and opponents around their claims or the claims of those they claim to represent.

From a contentious politics perspective, we can take away seven important lessons from the Israeli attack on the flotilla and the response to it:

*First*, the range of actors in the story goes well beyond the traditional subject of "social movements." Two major states, Israel and Turkey, the Islamist movement Hamas, a flotilla packed with humanitarian, peace, and pro-Palestinian NGOs, Israeli voters, European unions and governments, and global public opinion all came together in the conflict over Gaza. If we were to focus only on social movements, we would have told a rather truncated story. In this book, I will develop a relational approach to contentious politics, which focuses more

<sup>10</sup> As the usually conservative American security commentator Anthony Cordesman wrote,

“... the depth of America's moral commitment does not justify or excuse actions by an Israeli government that unnecessarily make Israel a strategic liability when it should remain an asset.”

Go to [www.normanfinkelstein.com/anthony-cordesman-is-whistling-a-new-tune/](http://www.normanfinkelstein.com/anthony-cordesman-is-whistling-a-new-tune/). Visited June 8, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> For a report from a surprised liberal group that was involved in passing the resolution, go to [www.jstreet.org/blog/?p=1110](http://www.jstreet.org/blog/?p=1110). Visited June 18, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> The Security Cabinet's decision can be found at <http://www.pmo.gov.il/PMOEng/Communication/Spokesman/2010/06/spokemediniyut170610.htm>. Visited June 18, 2010.

on the interactions among divergent actors than on the classical subject of social movements.

*Second*, the story shows how, under certain conditions, even small and temporary groups of collective actors can have explosive effects on powerful states. Without the provocation of the “freedom flotilla,” it is doubtful that the world’s attention would have focused on the festering sore of Gaza, or that Israel would have softened its blockade.

*Third*, the story illustrates the importance of spirals of *political opportunities and threats* in opening windows for contentious politics. Even in Israel, Leftist opposition groups gathered to protest the Israeli raid and were met with hostility by rightwing opponents.<sup>13</sup> We will give great attention to such spirals and to the “cycles of contention” that they constitute.

*Fourth*, the story tells us that we cannot understand episodes of contention without examining how contentious and institutional politics – including electoral politics – intersect. In the spring of 2010, Israel was governed by a weak and divided center-right coalition under a leader, Benjamin Netanyahu, who had already shown his willingness to bow to extreme xenophobic opinion. The threats to his government from the Right were important factors in the decision to attack the flotilla – an action that produced an opportunity for movement actors to mobilize. In this book, I will give particular attention to the interaction among contentious and institutional politics.

*Fifth*, the story shows the importance of what I will call “modular performances and repertoires” of collective action. The boycott is by now a familiar form of contention, instantly recognizable around the world. But it wasn’t always so; contentious politics has to be *learned*, and once forms of contention are seen to be viable, they diffuse rapidly and become modular. So common is the boycott form that pro-Israeli groups responded to the Swedish boycott threat with a boycott threat of their own!<sup>14</sup> An important theme of this book is the modularity of forms of contention and their diffusion.

*Sixth*, the story demonstrates the growing importance of transnational networking and mobilization, including mobilization through the Internet. Not only did the activists on the flotilla come from across the sea and represent several nations; an almost instant and overwhelming response to their actions came from around the world – including from the international Zionist community. We will investigate this growth of transnational contention and ask whether it is giving rise to a “global civil society.”

*Finally*, the story shows how widespread what we will call the “social movement repertoire” has become. Some scholars have wondered whether the world is becoming “a social movement society” (Meyer and Tarrow, eds. 1998). But that term first surfaced in the 1990s, when it seemed that peaceful forms of contentious action were spreading among ordinary people. With the turn of

<sup>13</sup> Go to <http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/leftist-and-rightist-israelis-clash-at-gaza-flotilla-protest-in-tel-aviv-1.294359> for a report on this clash. Visited June 8, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Go to [www.israelforum.com/board/showthread.php?t=10127](http://www.israelforum.com/board/showthread.php?t=10127). Visited June 7, 2010.

the new century, and especially after September 11, 2001, the phrase “social movement society” has taken on a new and more forbidding meaning. We will ask whether transgressive politics is beginning to overwhelm contained politics, and, if so, what are its implications for civil politics. But first we must clarify two key terms that will be employed in this book and their relationship to one another: social movements and contentious politics.

### **Social Movements in Contentious Politics**

Ordinary people often try to exert power by contentious means against national states or opponents. In the last fifty years alone, the American Civil Rights movement, the peace, environmental and feminist movements, revolts against authoritarianism in both Europe and the Third World, and the rise of new Islamist movements have brought masses of people into the streets demanding change. They often succeeded, but even when they failed, their actions set in motion important political, cultural, and international changes.

Contentious politics occurs when ordinary people – often in alliance with more influential citizens and with changes in public mood – join forces in confrontation with elites, authorities, and opponents. Such confrontations go back to the dawn of history. But mounting, coordinating, and sustaining them against powerful opponents is the unique contribution of the social movement – an invention of the modern age and an accompaniment of the rise of the modern state. Contentious politics is triggered when changing political opportunities and constraints create incentives to take action for actors who lack resources on their own. People contend through known repertoires of contention and expand them by creating innovations at their margins. When backed by well-structured social networks and galvanized by culturally resonant, action-oriented symbols, contentious politics leads to sustained interaction with opponents – to social movements.

How ordinary people take advantage of incentives created by shifting opportunities and constraints; how they combine conventional and challenging repertoires of action; how they transform social networks and cultural frameworks into action – and with what outcomes; how these and other factors combine in major cycles of protest and sometimes in revolutions; how the Internet and other forms of electronic communication are changing the nature of mobilization; and how the social movement is changing in the twenty-first century – these are the main themes of this book.

These themes take on special moment given the vast spread and growing diversity of contentious politics today. Just think of the variety of social movements since the 1960s: first civil rights and student movements; ecology, feminism, and peace movements; struggles for human rights in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian systems; Islamic and Jewish religious extremism in the Middle East and Hindu militancy in India; anti-immigrant violence in Western Europe and Christian fundamentalism in the United States; ethnic nationalism in the Balkans and the former Soviet Union; and suicide bombings in Iraq,

Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Over the past five decades, a wave of new forms of contention has spread from one region of the world to another, and among different social and political actors.

Not all these events warrant the term “social movement,” a term I will reserve for sequences of contentious politics based on underlying social networks, on resonant collective action frames, and on the capacity to maintain sustained challenges against powerful opponents (see Chapter 1). But all are part of the broader universe of contentious politics, which emerges, on the one hand, from within institutional politics, and can expand, on the other, into revolution. Placing the social movement and its particular dynamics historically and analytically within this universe of contentious politics is a central goal of this study.

### The Approach of the Study

In this book, I will not attempt to write a history of social movements or the broader field of contentious politics. Nor will I press a particular theoretical perspective on my readers or attack others – a practice that has added more heat than light to the subject. Instead, I will offer a broad theoretical framework for understanding the place of social movements, cycles of contention, and revolutions within the more general category of contentious politics. Too often, scholars have focused on particular theories or aspects of movements to the detriment of others. One example is how the subject of revolution has been treated. It is mainly seen in comparison with other revolutions, but in isolation from ordinary politics and almost never compared with the cycles of protest that it in some ways resembles (but see Goldstone 1998). We need a broader framework with which to connect social movements to contentious politics and to politics in general.<sup>15</sup> This book takes up this challenge.

### CONTENTIOUS COLLECTIVE ACTION

The irreducible act that lies at the base of all social movements, protests, rebellions, riots, strike waves, and revolutions is *contentious collective action*. Collective action can take many forms – brief or sustained, institutionalized or disruptive, humdrum or dramatic. Most of it occurs routinely within institutions, on the part of constituted groups acting in the name of goals that would hardly raise an eyebrow. Collective action becomes contentious when it is used by people who lack regular access to representative institutions, who act in the name of new or unaccepted claims, and who behave in ways that fundamentally challenge others or authorities.

Contentious collective action serves as the basis of social movements, not because movements are always violent or extreme, but because it is the main and often the only recourse that most ordinary people possess to demonstrate

<sup>15</sup> For this argument with illustrative syntheses, see McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001.

their claims against better-equipped opponents or powerful states. This does not mean that movements do nothing else but contend: they build organizations, elaborate ideologies, and socialize and mobilize constituencies, and their members engage in self-development and the construction of collective identities. Moreover, some movements are largely a-political, and focus on their internal lives or those of their members. But even such movements, as sociologist Craig Calhoun reminds us, encounter authorities in conflictual ways, because it is these authorities who are responsible for law and order and for setting the norms for society (1994b: 21). Organizers exploit political opportunities, respond to threats, create collective identities, and bring people together to mobilize them against more powerful opponents. Much of the history of movement/state interaction can be read as a duet of strategy and counterstrategy between movement activists and power holders.

“Collective action” is not an abstract category that is outside of history and stands apart from politics (Hardin, 1982; 1995). Contentious forms of collective action are different from market relations, lobbying, or representative politics because they bring ordinary people into confrontation with opponents, elites, or authorities. This means that the particular historical, cultural, and power conditions of their society in part determine and in part are determined by contentious politics. Ordinary people have power because they challenge power holders, produce solidarities, and have meaning to particular population groups, situations, and national cultures.

This means that we will have to embed the general formulations of collective action theory into history with the insights of sociology and political science and anthropology. In particular, we will see that bringing people together in sustained interaction with opponents requires a *social* solution – aggregating people with different demands and identities and in different locations in concerted campaigns of collective action. This involves, first, mounting collective challenges, second, drawing on social networks, common purposes, and cultural frameworks, and third, building solidarity through connective structures and collective identities to sustain collective action. These are the basic properties of social movements.

### The Basic Properties of Movements

With the emergence of the social movement in the eighteenth century, as I will show in Part I, early theorists focused on the three facets of movements that they feared the most: extremism, deprivation, and violence. Both the French Revolution and early nineteenth century industrialism lent strength to this negative reaction. Led by sociologist Emile Durkheim (1951), nineteenth century observers saw social movements as the result of anomie and social disorganization – an image well captured in the phrase “the madding crowd” (see the review in McPhail 1991).

While the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the normalization of movement activism into Social Democratic and Labor Parties, the

movements of the interwar period – in the form of Italian fascism, German Nazism, and Soviet Stalinism – fit the image of violence and extremism fostered earlier by the French and Industrial Revolutions. With the exacerbation of ethnic and nationalist tensions after the fall of communism in 1989–1992 and the terrorist outrages of the first decade of the twenty-first century, this negative view of social movements has been reinforced. We saw this view re-emerge in the “ancestral hatred” views of the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, most of them uninformed by social movement theory. We saw it again in the anti-immigrant violence in Europe, which evoked the horrors of the interwar years. And we see it most dramatically in the reactions to the militancy of Al Qaeda and other Islamist movements since the turn of the century.

But these are extreme versions of more fundamental characteristics of social movements. Extremism is an exaggerated form of the dramatization of meaning that is found in all social movements – what I will call in Chapter 7 “movement framing”; deprivation is a particular form of the common purposes that all movements express; and violence is an exacerbation of collective challenges, often the product of public clashes with police, rather than the intention of activists. Rather than defining social movements as expressions of extremism, violence, and deprivation, they are better defined as *collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities*.<sup>16</sup> This definition has four empirical properties: collective challenge, common purpose, social solidarity, and sustained interaction. (For a similar definition, see Tilly and Wood 2009.) Let us examine each of these briefly before turning to an outline of the book.

## COLLECTIVE CHALLENGES

Collective action has many forms – from voting and interest group affiliation to bingo tournaments and football matches. But these are not the forms of action most characteristic of social movements. Movements characteristically mount *contentious* challenges through disruptive direct action against elites, authorities, other groups, or cultural codes. Most often public in nature, disruption can also take the form of coordinated personal resistance or the collective affirmation of new values (Melucci 1996).

Contentious collective challenges most often are marked by interrupting, obstructing, or rendering uncertain the activities of others. But particularly in

<sup>16</sup> Charles Tilly writes:

Authorities and thoughtless historians commonly describe popular contention as disorderly. . . . But the more closely we look at that same contention, the more we discover order. We discover order created by the rooting of collective action in the routines and organization of everyday social life, and by its involvement in a continuous process of signaling, negotiation, and struggle with other parties whose interests the collective action touches.

See his *The Contentious French* (1986: 4).

authoritarian systems, where overt protest is likely to be repressed, they can also be symbolized by slogans, forms of dress or music, graffiti, or renaming of familiar objects with new or different symbols. Even in democratic states, people identify with movements by words, forms of dress or address, and private behavior that signify their collective purpose.<sup>17</sup>

Contention is not limited to social movements, though contention is their most characteristic way of interacting with other actors. Interest groups sometimes engage in direct challenges, as do political parties, voluntary associations, and groups of ordinary citizens who have nothing in common but a temporary coincidence of claims against others (Burstein 1998). Nor are contentious challenges the only form of action we see in movements. Movements – especially organized ones – engage in a variety of actions ranging from providing “selective incentives” to members, to building consensus among current or prospective supporters, to lobbying and negotiating with authorities, to challenging cultural codes through new religious or personal practices.

In recent decades, just as interest groups and others have increasingly engaged in contentious politics, movement leaders have become skilled at combining contention with participation in institutions. Think of the healthcare debate that roiled American politics in 2009–2010. Although it was dominated rhetorically by the debate in Congress and financially by well-heeled Washington lobbies, much of the public saw it through the lens of the so-called “Tea Parties” – in imitation of the Boston Tea Party, which helped to touch off the American Revolution – and the “town meetings” at which well-orchestrated challenges were organized against members of Congress who supported reform (see Chapter 5).

Despite their growing expertise in lobbying, legal challenges, and public relations, the most characteristic actions of social movements continue to be contentious challenges. This is not because movement leaders are psychologically prone to violence, but because they lack the stable resources – money, organization, access to the state – that interest groups and parties control. In appealing to new constituencies and asserting claims, contention may be the only resource that movements control. Movements use collective challenge to become the focal points of supporters, gain the attention of opponents and third parties, and create constituencies to represent.

## COMMON PURPOSES

Many reasons have been proposed for why people affiliate with social movements, ranging from the desire of young people to flaunt authority all the way to the vicious instincts of the mob. While it is true that some movements are marked by a spirit of play and carnival and others reveal the grim frenzy of the mob, there is a more common – if more prosaic – reason why people band

<sup>17</sup> Such movements have been characterized as “discursive” by political scientist Mary Katzenstein, who studied the movement of radical Catholic women in America in her *Faithful and Fearless* (1998). I will return to the relations between discourse and collective action in Chapter 7.

together in movements: to mount common claims against opponents, authorities, or elites. Not all such conflicts arise out of class interest, but common or overlapping interests and values are at the basis of their common actions.

Both the theory of “fun and games” and that of mob frenzy ignore the considerable risks and costs involved in acting collectively against well-armed authorities. The rebel slaves who challenged the Roman Empire risked certain death when they were defeated; the dissenters who launched the Protestant Reformation against the Catholic Church took similar risks. Nor could the African American college students who sat-in at segregated lunch counters in the American South expect much fun at the hands of the thugs who awaited them with baseball bats and abuse. People do not risk their skin or sacrifice their time to engage in contentious politics unless they have good reason to do so. It takes a common purpose to spur people to run the risks and pay the costs of contentious politics.

### SOCIAL SOLIDARITY

The most common denominator of social movements is thus “interest,” but interest is no more than a seemingly objective category imposed by the observer. It is participants’ *recognition* of their common interests that translates the potential for a movement into action. By mobilizing consensus, movement entrepreneurs play an important role in stimulating such consensus. But leaders can create a social movement only when they tap into and expand deep-rooted feelings of solidarity or identity. This is almost certainly why nationalism and ethnicity or religion have been more reliable bases of movement organization in the past than the categorical imperative of social class (Anderson 1990; C. Smith ed. 1996).<sup>18</sup>

Is an isolated incident of contention – for instance, a riot or a mob – a social movement? Usually not, because participants in these forms of contention typically have no more than temporary solidarity and cannot sustain their challenges against opponents. But sometimes, even riots reveal hints of a common purpose or solidarity. The ghetto riots all over America in the 1960s or in Los Angeles in 1992 were not movements in themselves, but the fact that they were triggered by police abuse indicates that they arose out of a widespread sense of injustice. Mobs, riots, and spontaneous assemblies are more an indication that a movement is in the process of formation than movements themselves.

### SUSTAINING CONTENTION

Long before organized movements began, contentious politics took many forms on the scene of history – from food riots and tax rebellions to religious wars

<sup>18</sup> Some students of social movements take the criterion of common consciousness to an extreme. Rudolf Heberle, for example, thought a movement had to have a well worked-out ideology. See his *Social Movements: An Introduction to Political Sociology* (1951). But others, such as Alberto Melucci, think that movements purposefully “construct” collective identities through constant negotiation. See Melucci’s “Getting Involved: Identity and Mobilization in Social Movements” (1988).

and revolutions – as we will see in Chapter 2. It is only by sustaining collective action against antagonists that a contentious episode becomes a social movement. Common purposes, collective identities, and identifiable challenges help movements to do this; but unless they can maintain their challenge, movements will evaporate into the kind of individualistic resentment that James Scott calls “resistance” (1985), will harden into intellectual or religious sects, or their members will defect from activism into isolation. Sustaining collective action in interaction with powerful opponents marks the social movement off from the earlier forms of contention that preceded it in history and accompany it today.

Yet movements are seldom under the control of a single leader or organization; how can they sustain collective challenges in the face of personal fear or egotism, social disorganization, and state repression? This is the dilemma that has animated collective action theorists and social movement scholars over the past few decades. My strongest argument will be that it is changes in public political opportunities and constraints that create the most important incentives for triggering new phases of contention for people with collective claims. These actions in turn create new opportunities both for the original insurgents and for late-comers, and eventually for opponents and power holders. The cycles of contention – and in rare cases, the revolutions – that ensue are based on the externalities that these actors enjoy and create. The outcomes of such waves of contention depend not on the justice of the cause or the persuasive power of any single movement, but on their breadth and on the reactions of elites and other groups.

I will turn to these political opportunities and constraints in Chapter 8. But here it is important to underscore what I do *not* mean by this. I do not claim that “objective” opportunities automatically trigger episodes of contentious politics or social movements, regardless of what people think or feel. Individuals need to *perceive* political opportunities and to be *emotionally engaged by their claims* if they are to be induced to participate in possibly risky and certainly costly collective actions; and they need to *perceive* constraints if they are to hesitate to take such actions. As we will see in the following chapters, individuals are often slow to appreciate that opportunities exist or that constraints have collapsed. This in turn helps to explain the important role of movement entrepreneurs in launching efforts such as the “freedom flotilla” – individuals and groups who seize opportunities, demonstrate their availability to others, and thereby trigger the cycles of contention that will be discussed in Chapter 10. It also explains why so many movements tragically fail – because their leaders perceive opportunities that are either weak or evanescent.

## An Outline of the Book

In the past twenty years, and influenced by economic thought, some political scientists and sociologists began their analyses of social movements from the puzzle that collective action is often difficult to bring about. That puzzle added a lot to social movement theorizing, but it is only a puzzle – not a sociological

law – because, in so many situations and against so many odds, collective action often *does* occur, on the part of people with few resources and little permanent power (Lichbach 1995).

Examining the parameters of collective action is the first task of Chapter 1. But the book will also approach three equally important problems: First, what are the dynamics of mobilization once it has begun; second, why are movement outcomes so varied; and, third, why do they so often fail to achieve their stated goals? Although Chapter 1 outlines these theories in a general way, evidence for them will be found in the movements and episodes analyzed in the remainder of the book.

In Part I, I will show how and where the national social movement developed, first in the eighteenth century West, where the resources for turning collective action into social movements could first be brought together over sustained periods and across territorial space, and then in more recent periods of history around the world. The focus of Chapter 2 is on what I will call, following the work of Charles Tilly, the modern “repertoire” of collective action. Then, in Chapter 3, I will turn to the changes in society that supported that transformation and, in Chapter 4, to the impact of capitalism and state building on the crystallization of modern contentious politics. Once the main forms of “modular collective action” were established, social movements could be diffused through Western state expansion, through print and association, and through the diffusion of these repertoires, first across the West and then across the globe. That will be the argument of Chapters 2 to 4 of the book.

But even deep-seated claims remain inert unless they can be activated. Part II will outline the four main powers that activate claims into action. In Chapter 5, I will examine the three main forms of contentious politics that movements employ – violence, disruption, and contained forms of action. In Chapter 6, I will deal with the major social and organizational bases that help to form movement organizations. In Chapter 7, I will examine how movements “make meanings,” by constructing identities, mobilizing emotions, and developing collective action “frames.” In Chapter 8, I will examine the kinds of political opportunities that trigger episodes of contention and the kinds of threats – especially threats from the state and the police – that limit them. These are the four main powers I see in movement.

In the third section of the book, I will turn from these analytical aspects of contentious politics and social movements to their interaction and dynamics. Contentious politics is nothing if it is not relational. Chapter 9 lays out an interactive approach to contentious politics that is based on the specification and examination of a number of key mechanisms: mechanisms such as mobilization and demobilization; campaign building and coalition formation; diffusion and scale shift; and radicalization and institutionalization.

These mechanisms are the analytical building blocks of the cycles of contention that will be studied in Chapter 10. The argument of this chapter is that once a cycle of contention is triggered, coalitions are formed, campaigns are organized, and the costs of collective action are lowered for other actors, and

master frames and models of activism become more generally available. The movements that arise in such contexts do not depend as much on their internal resources as on generalized opportunities in their societies, and elites respond less to single movements than to the general context of contention that they must deal with.

Such periods of generalized disorder sometimes result in immediate repression, sometimes in reform, often in both. But in political/institutional and personal/cultural terms, the effects of cycles of contention seldom correspond to a single movement's visible goals. These effects are noted both in the changes that governments initiate and in the periods of demobilization that follow. They leave behind permanent expansions in participation, in popular culture, and in ideology, as I will argue in Chapter 11.

If the national social movement was linked to the rise of the modern national state, the central question raised by the latest wave of contention is whether we are seeing the development of a *transnational* movement culture that threatens the structure and sovereignty of the national state. The same question can be asked of the plethora of transnational "NGOs" and civil society groups that have sprung up around the globe in the last few decades. As routine and bureaucratic in their way as protests against international institutions are disruptive and erratic, these transnational NGOs play an increasing role in linking domestic social movements both to one another and to the institutions that are increasingly responsible for regulating the global economy, fighting climate change, and attempting to combat human rights abuses. These are the questions I will turn to in Chapter 12.

This will take us, in the conclusions, to the contentious politics of the current epoch and to three important new issues: "globalization," lethal conflict, and the interactions between movements and states. In the last decades of the twentieth century, a wave of democratization spread across the world, culminating in dramatic changes in southern Europe in the 1970s, in Latin America in the 1980s, and in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of communism. But also in the 1990s, a new wave of "ugly" movements, rooted in ethnic and nationalist claims, in religious fanaticism, and in racism, broke out, bringing the world to a peak of turbulence and violence that it has not known for decades. Radical changes in electronic communication and cheap international transportation have reinforced these connections, creating the possibility of a new age of "global" social movements, but they have also given states unprecedented capacities for suppression.

Where protest and contention have become easier to mount and are largely legitimized; where police and power holders prefer to discuss tactics and issues with movements rather than repress them; where the media or the courts settle questions that once were fought over in the streets – in these conditions, will the historical form of the social movement be absorbed into ordinary politics, as were the strike and the demonstration in the last century? Or will the sheer volume of contention submerge the routine processes of electoral and interest

group participation in a turbulent sea of unruly politics? The shape of the future will depend not on how violent or widespread contention has become, but on how it relates to states, capitalism, and the international system. Because all three of these are undergoing profound change, in the century that lies ahead, the world may be experiencing a new and far-reaching power in movement.

seen in relation to those they challenge and to influential allies, third parties, and the forces of order, in the context of the specific type of regime in which they operate (Tilly 2006).

Chapter 9 specifies some of the key mechanisms and processes through which challengers interact with opponents, allies, third parties, and institutions. But these interactive dynamics will be visible only through examination of more or less extended trajectories of contention, to which I turn in Chapter 10. That chapter, which ranges from relatively pacific protest cycles to fully fledged revolutions, will focus on how varied groups of people mobilize at once and on how contention diffuses through campaigns and coalitions. It will also touch on a too-little-studied process of contentious politics: how and why these same people *demobilize*.

Chapter 11 turns from the dynamics of cycles to the outcomes of cycles of contention. In such general episodes of contention, policy elites respond not to the claims of any individual group or movement, but to the overall degree of turbulence and to the demands made by elites and opinion groups, which only partially correspond to the demands of those they claim to represent. That is why Chapter 11 has the paradoxical title “Struggling to Reform” – because individual movements almost never satisfy their largest ambitions. The important point is that, although movements usually conceive of themselves as outside of and opposed to institutions, acting collectively inserts them into complex political networks, and thus within the reach of the state.

Movements – and particularly waves of movement that are the main catalysts of social change – cannot be detached from national struggles for power. But in the last decade or so, a number of protest campaigns have clearly transcended national boundaries. What do they portend for contentious politics and, more broadly, for the shape of the future international system? Chapter 12 will employ the approach developed in the book to examine complex interactions between insiders and outsiders in the world polity.

The book closes by raising questions about three major issues in the study of contentious politics: First, how do movements interact with institutions, particularly electoral institutions; second, what about the “warring movements” that threaten the peace and stability of ordinary people; and, third, is the world becoming a “movement society,” one in which the line between institutional and unruly politics is increasingly erased, or is the threat of transgressive contention producing ever more repressive states?