REFLECTIONS ON A SUCCESSFUL INTELLECTUAL MOVEMENT: THE POLITICAL PROCESS APPROACH TO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS*

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This article begins in the distant 1970s, when social movement scholars felt disillusioned by the decline of the movements of the 1960s. That disappointment led European scholars to formulate a new paradigm with their discovery of "new" social movements, while it led North American scholars to shift from the "collective behavior" approaches of the previous decade to a focus on state and political processes. The convergence of these parallel tracks—as traced in this article—resulted in the creation of a trans-Atlantic coalition that profoundly influences how we study movements today. As the latter sections of the article argue, the political process approach has led to a number of parallel directions beyond movements—to polarization, democratic decline, and revolutions—and warrants a reflection on a successful intellectual movement.

The political process approach has had many definitions and varying specifications—from concrete interactions within political institutions (most widespread in American political science) to interactions with the wider society (more commonly found in European work). The general definition that rings truest to me comes from the work of Charles Tilly:[1] "A set of mechanisms that capture the interactions between powerholders, incumbents, and challengers."[2] These mechanisms can be classified as either dispositional, environmental, or relational; however, as I argue below, it is *relational* mechanisms that are most central to the political process approach. The most important of these mechanisms is mobilization, which first emerged from Tilly's work in his foundational textbook, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (1978), and became the lynchpin of the leading American journal in the field, called, appropriately *Mobilization*.[3]

Mechanisms concatenate into processes, some of which are short-term and are attached to particular episodes of contention—like diffusion (Corrigall-Brown 2022; Givan et al. 2010)—and scale shift (Tarrow and McAdam 2005). Others are longer term and more complex processes that involve actors both close to and distant from these episodes—processes like polarization, democratization, and revolution. One of the signal contributions of the approach was to extend familiar mechanisms from the social movement field to these broader processes (McAdam et al. 2001). This led—again employing Tilly's language—to attention to the broader range of phenomena known as "contentious politics," including polarization, democratic decline, and revolutions. In this article, I discuss the contributions of Charles Tilly before turning to the successor generations of social movement scholars and to the extension of the approach to broader processes of contentious politics.

TILLY AND THE ORIGINS OF THE POLITICAL PROCESS APPROACH

Although the term *political process* evokes the language of political science, it was actually a sociologist who launched the approach and mentored generations of students in history, political science, and sociology—Charles Tilly. Tilly was trained at Harvard University in the late 1950s and early 1960s, where he cut his teeth on a critique of the reigning functionalist sociologist at the

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time, Talcott Parsons. Tilly's dissertation took him to Europe, where his mentors were the great British social historians, Eric Hobsbawm and E. P. Thompson.[4]

Tilly's early synthesis of his approach came with his textbook, *From Mobilization to Revolution,* published in 1978, which brought to bear three cardinal facets of the political process approach:

- *political opportunities,* sometimes crystallized as static opportunity structures, sometimes as changing political environments;
- *mobilizing structures,* both formal movement organizations and the social networks of everyday life;
- and *repertoires of contention* and how these evolve in response to changes in capitalism, state building, and other, less monumental processes (McAdam et. al. 2001: 14–15).

Three features stood out in *From Mobilization to Revolution*: first, Tilly was concerned with contentious politics in general—and not only with social movements; second, although the book was not a history, it dealt with longer slices of the history of conflict than most social movement scholars, whose work was largely contemporary; and, third, Tilly was less attentive to what would become an important part of future work in the social movement tradition—collective action framing.

Tilly's first research contribution was the product of his dissertation, a study of the counter-revolution in the West of France, *The Vendée* (1964). That book focused on the structural underpinnings of collective action—particularly urbanization—but began to raise questions that moved in the direction of the processual approach, questions like:

- How, and how much, does social change affect opportunity bearing on potential actors?
- How much and how do mobilizing structures shape opportunity, framing processes, and contentious interaction?
- How much and how do opportunity, mobilizing structures, and framing determine repertoires of contention?
- How much and how do existing repertoires mediate relations between opportunity and contentious interaction, on the one side, and between framing processes and contentious interaction, on the other?
- How much and how does the pattern of state-building influence the patterns of opportunity, mobilizing structures, framing processes and contentious interaction?[5]

Questions like these served the social movement field well for half a generation. For example, political opportunities were at the heart of the comparative analyses of European environmental movements by Herbert Kitschelt (1986); they reappeared with Hanspeter Kriesi and his students in the study of protest in four European democracies (1995); by Doug McAdam (1982) in his work on the American civil rights movement, and by this author (1983 and 1989) on cycles of contention. The mobilization of resources was the process investigated by John McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald (1972, 1977) in their influential work on social movement organizations. But something was lacking from all of these contributions—how social movements are framed, by activists, states, and third parties, such as the media.

Framing Contention

Recognition of the importance of social movement "framing" was the contribution of David Snow and his collaborators, who drew on the work of social psychologist Erving Goffman (1974). They referred to how information is presented to individuals and groups (for a synthesis, see Snow 2004). The growing focus on framing overlapped with Tilly's interest in the repertoire and, in particular, in what people know about different forms of contention. But it was far more attentive to the ways in which actors, their opponents, and the media frame the issues around which episodes of contention are built.

An important spinoff of Snow et al.'s framing work was the effort by William Gamson and his collaborators. After McAdam brought the concept of the political process to the study of social movements, researchers—including some of the most ferocious critics of the *Dynamics* project (Goodwin and Jasper 2004)—shied away from the concept of "structure" in the political process tradition, which they found overly static. Drawing on the growing interest in culture in the social sciences, they brought the concept of emotions into the study of movements (Goodwin and Jasper 2006). Decades later, in an essay concluding the volume on political process approaches (Bosi and Malthaner 2027), McAdam expressed regret at the relative decline of "structure" that he saw in the shift to more cultural, behavioral, and relational mechanisms (McAdam 2027).

McAdam need not have been so worried, for there is no necessary contradiction between structure and process. Indeed, the models employed by recent scholars of revolution have shown how revolutionary processes emerge from structural conditions. George Lawson's book, *Anatomies of Revolution* (2019), focused on the takeover of political power, whether the main site of power is a state, city state, empire, kingdom, or principality. "In other words," he argued, "my focus is on the specific revolutionary projects rather than macrostructural transformations or domain specific shifts" (2019). In this respect, revolutions resemble social movement emergence and dynamics.

Protest Event Analysis: A Concept Finds a Method

The method of protest event analysis, which Tilly adapted from strike research, became one of the cardinal methodological innovations in the political process approach (Hutter 2014). Tilly's work was followed by Charles Perrow's Insurgency Project; McAdam's (1982) book on the rise and development of the civil rights movement; Craig Jenkins's (1985) book on the farm workers' move-ment; and Olzak's (1992) book on ethnic events.

Much in debt to Tilly's work on contentious gatherings in Britain, Dieter Rucht's "PRODAT" study traced German protests from the beginning of the postwar period to the reintegration of the country in 1989 (Rucht and Ohlemacher 1992). Tarrow (1989) used a similar method to examine the Italian cycle of protest from 1965 to 1974. Soon after, Hanspeter Kriesi and his collaborators studied protest events in four European countries (Kriesi et al. 1995), adding comparative analysis to the methods Tilly had pioneered on protest events.

After Tilly

There was a problem with the early political process tradition: For many scholars working in the 1980s and 1990s, the approach was overly structuralist and lacked an ontology specifying the mechanisms that produce movement outcomes. For many of these scholars, the process in social movement studies lacked exactly what social movements depend on—movement (McAdam 2027). Tilly attacked this problem by offering a relational perspective on the elements of the political process approach in his book The *Contentious French* (1986). The relational approach ripened in the 1990s when he studied historical British contention in his *Political Contention in Great Britain, 1758-1834* (1995). That book was best known for its evolution of British contention from the direct actions of contenders in the eighteenth century to the growing use of indirect forms like demonstrations and mass petitions in the nineteenth century.

As the political process approach diffused, dynamic perspectives arose among scholars who had cut their teeth in the movements of the 1960s. A forerunner was the work of Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward in their book *Poor People's Movements*, published in 1977. A broader historical effort to explain movement success was offered by William Gamson in his classic, *The Strategy of Social Protest*, in 1981. Studying fifty-three protest groups in American history in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Gamson found that organizational centralization and hierarchy—alongside the modesty of their goals—were key mechanisms in explaining move-ments' success. These developments would lead McAdam, Tilly, and Tarrow to the publication

of *Dynamics of Contention* in 2001. This much-cited—but also much criticized—book drew on both the American and European roots of the political process approach.

TWO ROOTS: "NEW" SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND CIVIL RIGHTS

As has often happened in social science, it was the outbreak of a cycle of contentious activity that fed this new wave of scholarly efforts. This occurred almost simultaneously in Western Europe and the United States, in the former around the metaphor of *new social movements*, and in the latter around the nucleus of movements touched off by civil rights.

"New" Social Movements in Europe

In the wake of the movements of the 1960s, Alain Touraine in France (1971), Alberto Melucci in Italy (1980), and Claus Offe in Germany (1985) paid attention to what they called "new social movements." None of these scholars were Marxists but—unwilling to fully jettison the structuralist ontologies they had inherited from the past—they arrived at the inference that the imputed hero of the classical structuralist account—the working class—was no longer the entering wedge of history. But they found it hard to escape a class ontology altogether; for this group of authors, it was the new middle class—or at least parts of it—that would lead the postwar struggle against the hegemony of the capitalist state.

The new social movement approach was never a theory, and it disappeared into the mists of contemporary history as many of the new movements of the 1970s became old—that is, they institutionalized (Offe 1990). Their approach also failed to travel, because many of the new movements in the United States had been around for generations—like the environmental and women's movements, and the civil rights movement, which had emerged in the early twentieth century with the creation of the Niagara Movement, leading to the formation of the NAACP (Morris 1984).

At the same time, Mayer Zald and John McCarthy were developing an organizational perspective to understand how American movements overcame the "collective action problem" that economist Mancur Olson Jr. had deduced from microeconomics (1966). This led them to observe that movements—like organizations in general—were flourishing in the postwar period and, by the 1970s, had begun to take over many of the functions of political parties (McCarthy and Zald 1973; 1977; Meyer and Tarrow 1998). What neither the European nor the American perspective addressed was the problem that social movements can only be understood through deliberate attention to the reciprocal relationship between movements and political institutions and—more generally—the state.

Civil Rights Shapes the Future

In the early 1980s, Doug McAdam took on this problem in the context of the twentieth century history of American civil rights. McAdam began his account with a structural factor—the migration of black Americans to the North and to southern cities, and their growing importance to the electoral fortunes of the Democratic Party. McAdam was also deeply attentive to changes in *dispositional* mechanisms—especially the general rise in optimism among Blacks regarding the prospects for social change in the post WWII era. But it was through the political process that he traced the development of these dispositions in his book *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (McAdam 1982[1999]).

McAdam did not limit his work to the black movement. Like Tilly before him and Alimi and della Porta after him (Alimi 2011; della Porta 2018), he was influenced by relational sociology. This influence is evident, for example, in his work on the mediating influence of social networks on recruitment to activism (McAdam and Paulson 1992), and in his book edited with Mario Diani, *Social Movements and Social Networks* (2003). But he also focused on shifts in the repertoire

of contention: how civil rights leaders shifted their forms of action in response to different combinations of enemies and allies in a key article on "Tactical Innovation and the Pace of Insurgency" (1983).

Although his work was mainly lodged in the United States, McAdam was among a generation of younger scholars who began to experiment with comparison. Two of these—Peter Eisinger (1973) and this author (1967)—used the comparative method to examine intranational variations in contention—the first in a study of American cities and the second in a study of the variations in Communist Party activism in northern and southern Italy. Then, writing with Dieter Rucht, McAdam explored the diffusion of disruptive forms of protest from the United States to Europe in a 1993 article, before publishing—with McCarthy and Zald—an ambitious comparative volume, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements* (1996). This volume would launch an emerging fusion among American and European scholars.

The civil rights movement inspired the work of both Kenneth Andrews (1997, 2001, 2002) and Joseph Luders (2003, 2005, 2006, 2010), both of whom—like McAdam before them—emphasized the dynamics of the political process. A dynamic, process-oriented approach was also central to the work of Paul Burstein (1985), of Craig Jenkins and Charles Perrow (1977), writing about the farm worker insurgency, and of Charles Brockett (1991), who studied peasant mobilization in Latin America. Few scholars in these decades took up the emphasis on repertoires that Tilly had put on the agenda, until the mid-1990s, when Mark Traugott devoted an entire book to *Repertoires and Cycles of Collective Action* (1995). Tilly closed the circle with his book, *Contentious Performances*, which was published after his death in 2008.

Repertoires After Tilly

Numerous scholars extended the concept of the repertoire that Tilly had developed in his account of British contention—some without employing the term. In two noteworthy articles on civil rights in the United States, Joshua Bloom (2015, 2020) focused on the practices of insurgents—very close to Tilly's concept of "performances"—and on their interaction with authorities and relevant third parties. Like Tilly, he was particularly interested in the "relational contexts" in which contention arises and evolves. "Context efforts," he writes, "are interactive, determining the effects of particular practices rather than causing insurgency by a group" (2015: 392; 2020).[6]

McAdam took the concept of the repertoire a step further. In his book *The Political Process of Black Insurgency* (1982), he studied how new forms of contention grew out of African American migration to the North. In a companion piece, he showed how leaders of the civil rights movement shifted their performances between southern cities in response to different repressive contexts (McAdam 1983).

But McAdam left the correlates of the radicalization of the movement in the late 1960s somewhat in the shadows. This lacuna was taken up in the analyses of radicalization by Eitan Alimi and his collaborators (Alimi et al. 2015) to understand radicalization in *enosis*-era Cyprus, in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, and in the violent contention between Israel and the Palestinians in the Middle East. In a comparative analysis of the outbreak of violence in Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine, and Cyprus, Alimi and his colleagues treated political violence as a phenomenon embedded in a complex web of sociopolitical relations, involving multiple parties and actors within parties such as political and social institutions, elites and pressure groups, and movement and countermovement organizations (Alimi 2018).

Marches became a routine part of the social movement repertoire during and after the civil rights movement. However, few scholars focused on how long the march endured over time or became the lynchpin of other performances. But Catherine Corrigall-Brown (2022) showed how the "Women's March" following Trump's first election endured and spread across the United States. In her book, *Keeping the March Alive: How Grassroots Activism Can Thrive Anywhere*, Corrigall-Brown showed how groups that were born in response to that event adapted their strategies not only to survive, but also to expand to previously unwelcoming areas.

But there was still a lacuna in the political process work—its practitioners largely elided movements of the right. This was, in part, because many of the scholars who launched the new approaches had cut their teeth on the progressive movements of the 1960s and thought of movements in terms of the protest performances practiced by the left. It was as new right-leaning movements revived in the 1990s that sociologists like Kathleen Blee (1991) and Rory McVeigh (2009) in the U.S., and political scientists like Cas Mudde (2007) in Europe studied emerging "populist" movements of the right; and Latin American theorists like Ernesto Laclau (2005) and empiricists like Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser (2022) developed the language of "populism" to examine the new wave of right-ßwing movements that were emerging in Latin America. As these parties and movements spread around the world, it was natural to turn to cross-regional analyses of far-right movements and parties (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017).

Between the neostructuralism of the "new social movement" school in Europe and the processual approaches developed in America, there was little interpenetration at first. But a group of European scholars helped to bring about the transition from new social movement theorizing to a political process perspective in Western Europe. Crucial in effecting this fusion were a Dutch social psychologist, Bert Klandermans, and a Swiss political scientist, Hanspeter Kriesi.

Klandermans and Kriesi

In the early 1980s, Klandermans (1992) began his career studying persuasive communication. In contrast to the focus on individuals in his home discipline, Klandermans was interested in intergroup persuasion, which led him to the social movements that were buzzing and blooming in Europe in the 1980s—especially the peace movement. In order to find support for his approach, Klandermans made a pilgrimage to several centers of research in the U.S.—including the University of Michigan, where he found Tilly and a platoon of graduate students beavering away on the construction of the dataset that would lead to Tilly's (1995) book, *Political Contention in Great Britain, 1758-1834*. This encounter resulted in a conference in Amsterdam of political scientists and sociologists who were studying the peace, ecological, and labor movements on both continents, and in the collective book that followed, which was called—appropriately—*From Structure to Action* (Klandermans, Kriesi, and Tarrow 1988).

At the same time that Klandermans was applying his social-psychological insights to the study of movements, Kriesi—influenced by the theories of new social movements emerging in Germany, France, and Italy—was uncomfortable with their lack of empirical grounding. He had become familiar with the methods of protest event analysis through Tilly's study of "contentious gatherings" in Britain and decided to apply them to the systematic study of protest events from samples of newspaper accounts in four different European countries—France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland—between 1975 and 1989 (Kriesi 1995; Kriesi et al. 1995). Through the work of Kriesi and his collaborators and of Dieter Rucht, European new social movement theory merged with the political process work coming out of the United States. The method was also applied in Latin America in Paul Almeida's (2008) study of waves of protest in El Salvador.

THE EMERGING SYNTHESIS

A visible result of these efforts was the formation of a rough-and-ready social network through which European and American scholars communicated, met at conferences, occasionally collaborated, and worked towards a comparative and historically embedded field of scholarship on movements and other forms of contention (McCarthy, McAdam, and Zald 1996). While these conferences were built on the infrastructure of established scholars, they also included younger scholars who would become central to the study of social movements over the next few decades.

Out of this growing interaction between Europeans and Americans, five major themes emerged:

1. The shift from the structural and collective behavior approaches of the 1960s to the exploration of political processes.

2. The application of new methods to the study of social movements—especially the method of protest event analysis.
3. A move from single-movement studies to what some scholars began to call waves or cycles of protest.[7]
4. The broadening of the field from movements *per se* to the broader canvas of contentious politics.
5. A growing use of the comparative method, both within Europe and more broadly.

Four scholars—two in Europe and two in the United States—reflected the growing consensus around the central components of the political process approach.

Rucht and della Porta Move Beyond "New" Social Movements

Like many European sociologists in the 1980s and early 1990s, Dieter Rucht and Donatella della Porta began their professional voyages in the "new social movement" tradition. But as it became apparent that the "new" movements were growing "older," both evolved into practitioners of a more politically inflected approach.

After completing his training in Munich, Rucht spent time in Paris, where he came under the influence of Alain Touraine.[8] But he also visited centers of social movement research in the United States, where he encountered the work of Tilly and his group at the University of Michigan and of the author at Cornell. Inspired by these efforts, Rucht returned to Berlin, where—along with Friedhelm Neidhardt—he helped found the WZB Research Unit, The Public Sphere and Social Movements, and collected a massive dataset, PRODAT, to trace protests in West Germany from 1950 until Unification in 1989 (Rucht and Ohlemacher 1992).

As a classically trained sociologist, Rucht was attentive to the links between the contemporary scene and classical theorists such as Robert Michels (Rucht 1999a). With Jürgen Gerhards, Rucht explored the process of "mesomobilization" in two protest campaigns in West Germany (Gerhards and Rucht 1992). He also made significant contributions to the study of the antinuclear movement (1990), transnational movements (1999b), and the anti-Iraq-war peace movement (Rucht and Walgrave, eds. 2008).

Almost contemporary with Rucht's contributions was the work of Donatella della Porta, who was trained in Catania but also began her professional career with Touraine in Paris. Returning to Italy, she worked with political scientists Gianfranco Pasquino and Philippe Schmitter, as well as with other sociologists. But della Porta's impact on the field is best measured by the scores of graduate students she trained, starting at the University of Florence, then at the European University Institute (EUI), and finally at the Scuola Normale Superiore, where she became dean and directed the Center on Social Movement Studies (COSMOS), the source of a number of critical studies on movements, democracy, and revolutions.

The substantive areas of della Porta's work are too numerous to detail, but she is perhaps best known for these recurring themes:

1. Movements and Violence. Growing out of her PhD thesis at the EUI, della Porta was perhaps the first to apply social movement theory to the relationship between movements and political violence. In her 1995 book, she explored the links between German and Italian terrorism and social movements. Then, her later works dealt with the following areas:

2. Violence and Repression. Working both on her own and with collaborators, her work on repression took her beyond Italy and Germany (see della Porta 1996 and della Porta and Reiter 1997).

3. Transnational Contention. Working first with Kriesi and Rucht (1999) and then in an edited book with some of her students (2007), she explored the effects of globalization on social movements. With Manuela Caiani (2009), she then turned to contention in the European arena.

4. Contentious Responses to Economic Crisis. As Europe and America descended into the "Great Recession" of 2007-9, della Porta developed an interest in political economy and its effects on social movements, on the effects of the EU's responses to it, and on the resulting growth of movement parties and referenda (della Porta et al. 2015; della Porta and Mattoni 2014).

5. Democracy, Revolution, and Movements. After the turn of the century, della Porta's interests broadened to the study of the relations between movements and democracy (2009) and to the role of movements in revolutions (2016). Anticipating the impending crisis of liberal democracies today, she adopted an interactionist perspective, writing increasingly about "momentous protest" (2018).

Meyer and Soule: The Processing of Protest

When we shift our attention from Europe to the United States, we find less emphasis on the tools of comparison than in Europe, but greater attention to the internal lives of movements. Indeed, apart from the landmark 1996 volume, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements,* Americans adopting the political process approach largely focused on the intricacies of that process in their own country. The advent of the global Great Recession and the rise of the far right partly reversed this particularism, but—as in their politics—most American scholars continued to regard their country as exceptional.

One way in which Americans who adopted the political process perspective went beyond their European counterparts was by giving greater attention to the connections between movements and institutions. This was evident as early as the 1970s, with Peter Eisinger's (1973) comparative analysis of contention in American cities; in the 1980s, with McAdam's (1983) account of the impact of the civil rights movement in different cities; and with Edwin Amenta's (2006) theory of "political mediation" that drew on his research on pension reform in the New Deal. Generalizing from this case, Amenta and his collaborators developed a sweeping model of the relations between movements and their political and institutional contexts (Amenta et al. 2010).

During the same period, David S. Meyer made contributions across a number of empirical research areas. Coming from a background as a scholar/activist of the U.S. peace movement of the 1980s (Meyer 1990),[9] Meyer developed a theoretical interest in the relationship between political opportunities and policy outcomes, beginning with a 1992 paper called "How We Helped End the Cold War (and Let Someone Else Take All the Credit)." Beneath the puckish title lay a theoretical elaboration of the relations between opportunities and public policy.

Over the past three decades, Meyer explored many aspects of movements in relation to the political process. First with William Gamson and then with Debra Minkoff (2003), he built on the political opportunity perspective. With Suzanne Staggenborg, he examined movement-countermovement interaction (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). With Nancy Whittier, he laid out a theory of "social movement spillover," using the peace and women's movements as examples (Meyer and Whittier 1994). Out of his work on the peace movement, he developed an interest in social movement coalitions in a book with Tom Rochon (Rochon and Meyer 1997).

Meyer went furthest among the Americans in connecting movements to institutions. This could be seen in the collection he co-edited with this author, *The Social Movement Society,* which examined the well-honed Michelsian thesis of movement institutionalization and found it wanting in its understanding of the full range of contemporary movements (Meyer and Tarrow 1998). This interest culminated in a collective book, *Social Movements, Public Policy, and Democracy in the United States,* which Meyer edited with Valerie Jenness and Helen Ingram in 2005, and in his *How Social Movements (Sometimes) Matter*, published in 2021.

Like Meyer's, Sarah Soule's work ranged across a wide range of empirical subjects, from lynching to campus protests to social legislation to the women's movement to the repression of protest within business organizations. She was a pioneer in applying event-history methodology to social movements and in developing a definitive protest-event database in modern America.[10] She made three main contributions to the political process approach:

1. On the Diffusion of Social Movements. From her 1997 article on campus protests against universities' investments in Apartheid South Africa, Soule has been a leading practitioner of diffusion research. She made major methodological contributions to the study of diffusion with David Strang (Strang and Soule 1998), contributions that continued in her landmark book edited with Rebecca Givan and Kenneth Roberts (2010), *The Diffusion of Social Movements: Actors, Mechanisms, and Political Effects.* Diffusion was also a focus of Soule's work on social

policy. With Yvonne Zylan (1997), in "Runaway Train? The Diffusion of State Level Reform in ADC/ AFDC Eligibility Requirements, 1950–1967," she found that the diffusion of the Clinton-era rollback of social security followed roughly the same geographic pattern of diffusion as the establishment of early social reform programs.

2. Protest and Institutional Politics*.* Although her work has centered mainly on protest activities and protest repertoires, Soule also developed an interest in the relationship between institutional and non-institutional collective action. For example, in a multivariate analysis of the women's movement and congressional activities between 1956 and 1979, which she crafted with McAdam, McCarthy, and Yang Su, she found little support for the widely held hypothesis that women's collective action had a significant effect on congressional hearings and on roll-call votes on issues of interest to women (Soule, McAdam, McCarthy, and Su 1999).

3. Protest and Repression. Another aspect of the relations between protest and institutions was Soule's contributions to our understanding of repression. Working with both Christian Davenport (2009) and Jennifer Earl (2009), she examined the widely accepted hypothesis that state responses to protest had evolved since the 1960s from a highly repressive policy to a policy of "public order management" (McPhail, Schweingruber, and McCarthy 1998). Soule and her collaborators found that this was partly true, but only for more institutionalized forms of contention, not for the more disruptive forms that evolved from the movements of the 1960s.[11]

BEYOND MOVEMENTS AND OUTSIDE THE LIBERAL WEST

Together with many other Europeans and Americans, these four scholars sharpened the political process approach, giving growing attention to the dynamics within that process, and leading to an extension of political process work beyond movements. First, Tilly and his collaborators focused more broadly on the "dynamics of contention"; then others—drawing on a prior tradition in political science—extended the approach to the process of "polarization"; and still others began to connect polarization to the threats to democracy that became ever more alarming in the new century.

The Dynamics Project

In their book *Dynamics of Contention,* McAdam, Tilly, and Tarrow (2001) worked to synthesize and extend the work on political processes that they inherited from before the turn of the century. Drawing on both countries where they had worked and areas of the world where they relied on secondary literature, their goal was not to conduct empirical research but to ask a series of questions driven by a dynamic approach to contentious politics.

Bringing mechanisms to the center of the analysis of contention was the first ontological bet made by the authors of *Dynamics of Contention*. If that message was less than universally acclaimed by contemporaries, it was in part because they were trying to move beyond well-accepted structuralist traditions for studying movements. This led them to carry out paired comparisons of more complex processes. Many of their efforts came from outside the traditional range of reformist social movements that had been the stock-in-trade of the classical approach.

The authors of *Dynamics* emphasized relational mechanisms like brokerage, a mechanism in which a third actor connects two actors that would otherwise have remained unconnected (McAdam et al. 2001: 57); certification, when an actor is recognized as legitimate by another (p. 346); and category formation, the authoritative drawing of a boundary and the management of relations across that boundary, as when Bosnian Serb leaders in the 1990s decreed who in Bosnia is a Serb and who is not, then regulated how Serbs interact with non-Serbs. *Dynamics* also emphasized more complex processes like scale shift*,* a change in the number and level of coordinated contentious actions leading to broader (or narrower) episodes of contention. Scale shift—they argued—can occur between local and national and between national and transnational levels of contention (Tarrow and McAdam 2005; Soule 2013).

Dynamics also drew on research traditions on revolutions, nationalism, and democratization—each of which possessed its own literatures and bodies of theory. In doing so, the book emphasized the interactions among movement actors and between them and states, countermovements, and citizens. Judging only from the expanded appearance of the term "contentious politics" in books in print from the 1990s until the second decade of the new century, the effort to broaden the field from social movements to contention in general appears to have been broadly successful.

Polarization and Threats to Democracy

Around the turn of the century, a new family of political parties and movements began to create a more polarized politics in the United States and elsewhere. For some scholars—like Morris Fiorina (2006)—polarization was no more than a "myth," while for others, like Alan Abramowitz (2010), it was both real and dangerous. Since the 1970s, he argued, there had been widening ideological gaps between liberal and conservative voters, particularly among those who were most active in politics (2008). But basing their conclusions primarily on survey data, Fiorina and Abramowitz were worried about the growth of new social movements, because, they argued, "polarization energizes the electorate and stimulates participation" (545-6).

There were two main lacunae in the American debate about polarization: First, it was based mainly on survey or electoral data, which led scholars to ignore the growing incidence of right-wing *movements* and their effects on the electorate (McAdam and Kloos 2014). Second, until the work of Matt Grossmann and Daniel Hopkins (2016) on asymmetric polarization, polarization was seen as balanced, and there was little recognition that it could affect one side of the party system more than the other.

In the decades after the turn of the century, the sharp turn to the right in the Republican Party and the appearance of the Tea Party movement (Rafail and McCarthy 2024) underscored the impregnation of movements and parties (Heaney and Rojas 2015; Tarrow 2021). Around the charismatic figure of Donald Trump, the MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement brought together mainstream Republicans, veterans of the Tea Party, and more dangerous figures coming from right-wing and racist movements (Feagin 2025). These currents erupted into the attack on the Capitol in January 2021 after Trump lost the 2020 election, a loss that he attributed to electoral fraud by the Democrats.

American scholars might have learned a lot about polarization by paying attention to what was happening across the Atlantic. At roughly the same time and under the conceptually broad label of "populism," anti-immigrant sentiment fueled the rise of right-wing parties and movements on that continent. This was not only a distinct phenomenon of parties and movements but the result of a growing impregnation between the two, which scholars like Herbert Kitschelt (2006) and Donatella della Porta and her colleagues (2018) labeled "movement-parties." In Hungary, Viktor Orban turned the former movement party—Fidesz—from an electoral party to an autocratic machine (Scheppele 2022).[12] Encouraged by Orban's success, right-wing movements and parties turned the normal give-and-take between right and left into a process of "pernicious polarization" (McCoy and Somer 2022).

"Populist" polarization was not limited to Europe or the United States. Spurred by the adoption of neoliberal economic policies, polarization in Latin America led to the collapse of many mainstream parties (Anria and Roberts 2026; Roberts 2019; Almeida and Perez Martin 2022) and to the transfer of activism to the state (Rich 2019). In some cases, like Bolivia, there was a transmutation from movement to party (Anria 2019). In others, as was the case in Chile following a major wave of student protests, a movement failed to transform into a progressive party (Donoso, Miranda, and Pavlic 2026). On all three continents, there were growing concerns that the election of right-wing figures and their support from insurgent movements would lead to authoritarian outcomes.

Trumpism and the MAGA Movement

The most dramatic of these concerns came in the United States with the election of Donald J. Trump, first in 2016, and again in 2024. This was not simply a shift from moderate to extreme party politics; on both occasions, Trump was elected with the support of coalitions that included grassroots activists, gun rights groups, economic interest groups, and a growing MAGA movement (Skocpol and Tervo 2020). Trump's rhetorical genius brought hundreds of thousands of new voters into the Republican column (Mercieca 2020) and brought about a merger of traditional Republicans with external groups. By his second election campaign, Trump had gained the support of groups from "inside the beltway," like the Heritage Foundation, which—under the disarming label of *Project 2025*—provided him with the intellectual support of a coalition of right-wing thinkers and policy analysts.[13] Despite Trump's denial of its influence over him or his program, the first year of his second administration followed many of its policy indications like a template.[14]

Even before Trump's second election in 2024, American scholars began to worry about the danger of an authoritarian inversion in their country (Lieberman, Mettler, and Roberts 2021; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). At university centers in Berkeley, Chicago, and Cornell, research programs sprang up in defense of democracy. Soon after each of Trump's elections—but especially after the second one—millions of activists descended into the streets in what came to be called the "No Kings" protests.

Outside the United States, Trump's appeal began to appear as a model for other right-wing leaders, under the banner of jingoistic nationalism. This included leaders like Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Javier Milei in Argentina, and El Salvador's Nayib Bukele. Trump's support for Israel's right-wing Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu, and for Hungary's authoritarian President Viktor Orban extended the appeal of "Trumpism" well beyond America's borders. Even in Chile, which had experienced a progressive near-revolution in 2019, a right-wing candidate, Antonio Kast, won the presidency in 2026 by seeking the protection and guidance of Donald Trump (Donoso et al. 2026). To many, Trumpism and its copiers abroad seemed like a project for a transnational revolution.

REVOLUTIONS AS POLITICAL PROCESSES

In his book on European revolutions, Tilly (1993: 7) cracked that "revolutions are more like traffic jams than solar eclipses." In a similar vein, George Lawson has departed from what he called the concept of "Big-R revolutions," in favor of an approach he called "configurational causation—a concern for the ways in which events and sequences are ordered into causal complexes" (Lawson 2019: 59). In a more recent reflection, Lawson (2026: 21) writes that ". . . a view of Revolution in the singular occludes the multiple ways in which modern revolutions have been conceived and practiced." In this respect, Lawson's work on revolutions is closer to the tradition of political process analysis than to the structuralist tradition that was founded by Barrington Moore Jr. (1966), followed by his student, Theda Skocpol (1979), and then by her student, Jeff Goodwin (2001).

As Lawson (2019: 3) writes of this "great" tradition: "By the early part of the nineteenth century, the constitutional revolutions of America and France had become seen as archetypal—the latter in particular crystallized the notion of revolution as a deliberative act, signified by the emergence of a distinct category of *revolutionnaire."* He continues, *"*From this point on, revolution was a future-oriented act—an ongoing project of potentially unlimited duration" (Lawson 2019: 3).

This is not to claim that revolutions are *nothing more than* movements. Rather, movements that emerge from structural conditions are often the opening salvos of processes that widen into broader contention (Goldstone 1998). Indeed, as Lawson points out, "recent years have seen the rise of a number of groups within democratic capitalist states that blend social movement techniques with revolutionary rhetoric: Occupy Wall Street, Podemos, Syriza, and more" (Lawson 2019: 228). In what follows, I examine a variety of relationships between structural factors and movements that transmuted into revolutions, beginning with the 1919 revolution in British-run Egypt and moving from there to three revolutionary processes in the new century.

Egypt in 1919: Circuitries of the Colonial State and Economy

In the wake of World War One, a number of the possessions in the British Empire revolted against their colonial masters and sought independence. Under the influence of American President Woodrow Wilson, the postwar Paris Peace Conference and its resulting Versailles Treaty spoke loftily of self-determination for ethnic and national groups. Primary among these were Egyptian nationalists, who attempted to send a delegation to Paris to represent the claims of a country that had been under foreign control for centuries—first under Ottoman, then Turkish, and finally British control. British authorities wasted no time in whisking the delegates into exile and clamping down on the budding movement.

It was a mistake: Outraged by this peremptory move, groups of Egyptians, both in Cairo and along the Nile, attacked the communication hubs and transportation networks that tied the country together. Weakened by the war and with few available troops at hand, the British were unable to staunch this sudden outpouring of attacks on the country's networks. As Neil Ketchley (in press: 6) writes of this unexpected explosion, "how Egyptians mobilized, how their mobilization unfolded, and how they won major concessions was often ineluctably tied to their ability to both repurpose and sabotage the circuitries of the colonial state and economy."[15]

"With protests and strike actions continuing to spread across the country," Ketchley found in his forthcoming book, *Egypt in an Age of Revolution,* that "Egyptians in more rural areas began to mobilize in increasing numbers." It was during this period that we see a wave of attacks on railway and telegraph lines—events that quickly undermined the coordinating capacity of the colonial state. With Cairo cut off from the rest of the country, colonial officials panicked and began pressing London to make a major concession—one that would come to irrevocably undermine British rule in the country and elsewhere (Ketchley forthcoming: 12). What began as a scattered series of attacks on the sinews of the colonial state became what Egyptians began to call a revolution.

Tunisia in a Time of Revolution

A much later context is explored in Chris Barrie's work on the process of revolutionary protest in the Tunisian revolution of 2010-11 (2023). Barrie employed a multi-method approach to this well-studied uprising, including survey data, event history analysis, analysis of social media records, and examination of journalistic sources. The revolution arose out of structural conditions in the backward industrial areas of the country, but as the insurgency moved from the periphery to the center of Tunisian geography, it led to the frame of "democratization" as a "bridging theme," which brought together the various strands of the movement and challenged the autocratic practices of the outgoing regime.

Much of the literature on revolutions regards mobilization as the key mechanism in the origin of such struggles. Barrie does not disagree but insists on the relational mechanisms that drive mobilization and on the progress of a movement that arose among workers in a backward region toward a national revolution. Foremost among these mechanisms, he identifies brokerage, which he defines—following *Dynamics of Contention*—as "the linking of two or more previously unconnected social sites by a unit that mediates their relations with one another and/or with yet other sites" (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001: 206). "If we take these coalitions as the object of explanation," he argues, "brokerage emerges as the key mechanism underpinning what I suggest are the defining characteristics of processual revolutions: the emergence of common revolutionary demands and the incorporation of new protestor groups into a common front" (Barrie 2023: 13).

Beissinger on Urban Revolutions

The tradition of revolutionary scholarship from which Lawson, Ketchley, and Barrie took their distance dealt with revolutions with largely agrarian roots. At the forefront of these studies was Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions,* which was built on extended narratives of the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions. This focus on great revolutions allowed Skocpol to

identify a few key variables central to all three revolutions. In his book on *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet Union (2002),* Mark Beissinger (2003) had applied protest event analysis to a country outside the range of the liberal democracies of the West. In a second book, *The Revolutionary City: Urbanization and the Global Transformation of Rebellion* (2022), he took a definitive step beyond the classical/agrarian tradition of revolutionary studies.

Beissinger (2022) departed from the classical tradition in two key ways: first, by focusing on *urban* revolutions, and in particular on the Ukrainian revolution of 2016; and, second, by examining how central state institutions in capital cities afforded the "circuitries" of which insurgents seized hold. While French, Russian, and Chinese revolutionaries had to spread their attacks across the surface of the countries they were attempting to take over, Ukrainian revolutionaries could zero in on major centers of political power—using repertoires of contention that were not very different from those found in social movements.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I first demonstrated how the political process approach grew out of dissatisfaction with the structural approaches of the 1960s, illustrating the argument through Tilly's work in the 1960s and 1970s. I then showed how a broad transatlantic consensus grew up to inform the study of both social movements and the broader range of contentious politics since then. I illustrated the particular way in which this persuasion was implemented in *Dynamics of Contention,* in the study of polarization and threats to democracy, and, finally, in how other scholars—most of them working independently—crafted approaches that turned on particular mechanisms in the political processes of revolutions.

An important component of the approach is its focus on the relations between movements and institutions. Movement scholars like McAdam and Tarrow (2010) and Daniel Gillion and Soule (2018) proposed a set of mechanisms that connect movements to elections, while historical political scientists Daniel Schlozman (2015) and Sidney Milkis and Dan Tichenor (2019) explored the relations between movements and the state. The impact of a recent social movement on electoral outcomes was studied by Neal Caren and his collaborators, who found that participation in the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 was associated with increased likelihood of support for the Democratic candidate in subsequent elections (2023).

In the new century, the relations between movements and parties became a preoccupation of social movement scholars. In a 2018 study, Meyer and Tarrow showed how the election of Donald Trump in 2016 triggered a broad oppositional movement. In parallel, Skocpol and Tervo (2020) showed how Trump's right-wing campaign found a footing among pre-existing groups and movements. These included the Tea Party, which was already in transition from a movement into a faction of the Republican Party (Blum 2020; Rafail and McCarthy 2024) and the gun rights and police support groups that they found in the same constituencies. In the same vein, this author diagnosed the Trump takeover of the Republican Party as the formation of a "movement-party" (2021), a linkage first described in Europe by Kitschelt (2006), and della Porta and her collaborators (2018), and in Latin America in Santiago Anria (2019) on the Bolivian MAS. However, important lacunae remain:

First, the study of labor unions—although they have many of the properties of social movements—remains a distinct subfield curiously detached from the developments that have been surveyed in this article.[16]

Second, after the turn of the century, legal scholars and social movement scholars began to converge in showing how activists use the courts in pursuit of their common preoccupations with social change, the environment, and social constitutionalism (Cummings 2018; Andrews and Jowers 2018). This tradition may help to understand the role of lawyers and the courts in curtailing the abuses of the Trump administration.

Third, an important shift is linked to the rise of identity politics, in which social movements mobilize around the experiences and identities of marginalized groups. The most telling example

came from studies of the intersection between gender, sexuality, and movements, best reflected in the work of Verta Taylor and her collaborators and students (Taylor 1992; Taylor and Rupp 2002; Taylor et al. 2009; Whittier 1995). But in other areas, "collective identities" have too often been disconnected from political processes, which recent work on the links between white nationalism and the Trump movement may serve to correct (Ehrenberg 2022).

Fourth, although Latin American scholars have developed their own approaches to the links between politics and movements (Almeida and Cordero 2015; Anria and Roberts 2026), apart from a few scholars, like Maria Inclán in Mexico (2008), and Paul Almeida in Central America (2008), there has been little systematic application of the methodology of protest event analysis in that region. Building Latin American databases on these protest events would provide leverage for comparisons with their European and American parallels.

Fifth, and perhaps most important: except for a few scholars influenced by Marxism (Barker et al. 2013), the political process approach has largely avoided the structural foundations of social movements and other forms of contention. The Great Recession of 2007-09 helped to correct this lacuna, reminding scholars that movements are embedded in capitalist means of production (della Porta et al. 2013; Kriesi et al. 2020). But apart from students of revolution, like Ketchley (in press), and students of urban policy, like Krinsky (2008), scholars have left the links between movement processes and the structures out of which they emerge largely unexplored.

Ought we to combat the growing diversity in the political process approaches examined in this essay and try to identify "The One Best Way" to wisdom about the intersection between movements and the political process? The sense of this article—and of the approach in general—is that we will make more intellectual progress by letting a hundred flowers bloom than by engaging in the "paradigm warfare" that so often results from seeking the "one best way" to wisdom (Tarrow 2004: 45-46). This includes connecting the political process of social movements to their structural origins.

A Return to Structure

After McAdam brought the concept of the political process to the study of social movements, many scholars—including some of the most ferocious critics of political process approaches (Goodwin and Jasper 2004)—shied away from the concept of "structure" in that tradition, which they found overly static. Drawing on the growing interest in culture in the social sciences, they brought the concept of "emotions" into the study of movements (Goodwin and Jasper 2006). Decades later, in an essay concluding a volume on political process approaches (Bosi and Malthaner 2027), McAdam expressed regret at the relative decline of "structure" that he saw in the shift to more cultural, behavioral, and relational mechanisms to which he himself had contributed (McAdam 2027).

He need not have been so worried, for there is no necessary contradiction between structure and process. Indeed, as we have seen, the models employed by recent scholars of revolution have shown how revolutionary processes emerge from structural conditions. Lawson's book *Anatomies of Revolution* (2019) focused on the takeover of political power, whether the main site of power is a state, city-state, empire, kingdom, or principality. "In other words," he argued, "my focus is on specific revolutionary projects rather than macro-structural transformations or domain-specific shifts" (ibid.). In this respect, revolutions are an extension of the emergence and dynamics of social movements.

NOTES

[1] For a synthesis and appreciation of Tilly's influence, see Hanagan, Moch, and te Brake (1998).
[2] See part two of Bosi and Malthaner, eds. (2027), for several valuable reflections on the mechanism-based approach to processes of collective action.
[3] *Mobilization* was founded by Hank Johnston at San Diego State University. Although its original inspiration and its editorial board were mainly American scholars, it soon became a vehicle for comparative and European work as well.
[4] Tilly's methodological departures were in debt, respectively, to Thompson's "The Moral Economy of the English

Crowd in the Eighteenth Century" (1971), and Hobsbawm and Rude's *Captain Swing* (1971). These historiographic sources are often missed by social movement scholars who have adopted some of Tilly's approaches but without their historical embedding.

[5] The introductory passages of *Dynamics of Contention* summarize those questions on pp. 14-19.

[6] Particularly interesting was his turn, in his 2015 piece, to contentious politics during the Truman administration, when a little-studied branch of the civil rights movement was driven by the international context of that period and lost out to the more domestically oriented civil rights movement. But more important for the progress of political process approaches was his interactive approach to the relations between repression and insurgent practice in his 2020 article.

[7] For examples, see Koopmans (1993), Mueller (1999), and Tarrow (1989).

[8] Though first in debt to Touraine's version of new social movement theory, Rucht was later critical of the French theorist. See his essay "Sociological Theory as a Theory of Social Movements? A Critique of Alain Touraine" (1991).

[9] Other notable contributions on peace movements will be found in Meyer (1993a and b).

[10] The database, widely known as the "Dynamics of contention," was co-directed by Soule with Doug McAdam, John McCarthy, and Susan Olzak, and is available for the use of the broader scholarly community and was supported by a collaborative research grant from the National Science Foundation (SBR-9709337).

[11] Employing the same dataset, McAdam and Su (2002) studied antiwar protests and congressional voting, 1965-1973.

[12] On April 12, 2026, Orban failed to win a fifth term in the national elections—losing to a former FIDESZ member. *New York Times*, April 12, 2026. https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/12/world/europe/hungary-election-orban-magyar.html.

[13] For a detailed journalistic analysis, see Graham (2025).

[14] See https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/tracking-how-much-of-project-2025-the-trump-administration-achieved-this-year.

[15] I am grateful to Neil Ketchley for allowing me to cite his forthcoming study *Infrastructures of Revolt: Mass Politics in the 1919 Egyptian Revolution.*

[16] But see the contributions of Keith Mann (2013, 2014)

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