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Perspektiven auf globale Politik

CONTESTED PERCEPTIONS OF CONTENTIOUS POLITICS: FRAMING AS TRANSLATION

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How is it that the actions of institutions come to be perceived as unjust by a critical mass? And how does this perception translate into collective action? Adopting a framing perspective, this article proposes to investigate the meanings that people attach to specific events as key for understanding interaction dynamics between social movement and institutions.

Ferguson protest in Memphis | *Photo by Chris Wieland (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)*

by Jannis Julien Grimm*

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How is it that the actions of institutions come to be perceived as unjust, illegitimate, disproportionate, or abusive by a critical mass? And how does this perception translate into action, for example, materialize in mass protests able to shake an institutional setting to its roots?

For over four decades, peace and conflict studies, social anthropology, transition studies, and particularly social movement researchers have investigated the relationship between movements and political institutions, as well as the manifold ways that states and their agents attempt to counter, co-opt, or respond to mobilizing efforts. Even so, the link between how actions (e.g., blatant violence by security institutions) are perceived and interpreted, and the material reaction to those actions remains largely understudied. Equally understudied are the effects of emotionality and affect. Emotions as material rhetoric have affective power: the generate and create meaning in the world through the histories and contexts they invoke. Sara Ahmed (2004) has marvellously illustrated the processes by which politics of emotion create "others" by "working through signs and on bodies to materialise the surfaces and boundaries that are lived as worlds" (191). Her and other works in cultural anthropology (e.g., Scheer 2014; Luhrmann 2010) uncover how emotions endow bodies with value and align them in relation to ideologies.

In the relatively rational-choice oriented social movement literature, however, both emotions and affective narratives rarely figure: mobilization is rather explained by the shifting ratio between the costs of participation and of abstention, than by the difficult-to-quantify impact of, e.g. police brutality, on people's affective economies. Exceptions from this general trend are few (e.g., Goodwin, Jasper, Polletta 2001; Jasper 2011; Pearlman 2013) as affect is more often than not either black-boxed, or referred to only indirectly, e.g. as the 'moral shock' that institutions risk to provoke, if they apply too much violence (Jasper & Poulsen 1995, Jasper 1998). But how is it that certain physical experiences become encapsulated in condensing symbols with mobilizing power – an affective power that inspires support for a certain cause and materializes in collective action?

It is precisely at this juncture that this intervention is situated: I propose to investigate the meanings that people attach to specific events as key for understanding interaction dynamics between social movement and institutions. These meanings are, above all, discursively mediated, and thus traceable in their effects through careful analysis of contentious discourses. Hence I suggest to study the outcome of the constantly fought discursive battles over interpretation and to trace their effects on the action choices of contending groups (e.g., their repertoires, their mobilizing strategies, their proneness to violence, or their composition). A framing perspective serves as the methodological vehicle for this venture. However, I suggest to conceive of frames not merely along the lines of instrumentalism and strategic placement. Instead, we may think of them as 'translation mechanisms.' These intervene and mediate the

interaction between movements and institutions by translating physical experiences into affective markers with mobilizing power. Such a revised framing perspective offers a more flexible framework for analysis: it takes into account not only who acted how towards whom, as well as material and organizational predispositions and permutations, but also the competing meanings that contenders actors attach to the events they witness and the emotional experiences that these meanings encapsulate.

Acknowledging the Discoursive Dimension of Contentious Politics

This approach dovetails Tilly, Tarrow and McAdams's "dynamics of contention" programme (cf., McAdam et al. 2001; Tilly & Tarrow 2007) by affirming the dynamic character of the social interactions between contenders and institutions. Instead of explaining collective action from individual motivations and material or ideological predispositions, the authors treat social protests (as well as grievances, ideological programs and protest frames) as products of complex processes of interaction with authorities, coalition partners, competitors, and the public. Tilly (2005: 222) argues that ultimately protest episodes are not activists' solo-performances. On the contrary, they involve a high degree of social interaction: spectators, for instance, can become sympathisers or enemies that support or refuse demonstrators' demands; they can become activists themselves, or take part in repression. This realization, that the relationship between protest and repression is a dynamic one that works both ways (i.e., in which causal effects can be identified on both sides), has come to define the conceptual perspective of ever more research projects – introducing with great success a more dynamic and relational perspective into the study of mobilization. In fact, it has lifted the discipline beyond the often anatomic study of organization, mobilizing structures, and idiosyncratic ideologies.

From this work, we have a sense of what tactics will be used on both sides (e.g., violent as well as nonviolent activities), and a sense of what provokes violent behaviour; we have some insights into what consequences are most likely when protest movements take to the street in large numbers, or when protests are crushed; and we have some idea about the perks and pitfalls of sources on contentious politics (Davenport 2005: vii). Above all, repression and the policing of protest have received special scholarly attention, coming close to creating a sub-discipline of its own in the larger strand of movement studies. The interest in what is varyingly called the "protest-repression nexus" (a.o., Carey 2006, 2009), the mobilization-repression nexus (e.g., Davenport 2005; Johnston 2012; Tilly 2005), the repression-dissent nexus (e.g., Koopmans 2005; Lichbach 1987; Moss 2014; Tilly 2005), or the dissent/coercion nexus (e.g., Francisco 2005; Karklins 1987) is partly a result of media's "when it bleeds, it leads"-logic which has made physical repression the most visible expression of institutional reaction to protest. And it is partly due to the outrage that repression is able to generate, and which sometimes translates into mass uprisings and revolutionary

events. However, much of current conceptual research has focussed on the physical features of repression in order to explain protest reaction, and vice versa: Repressions were found to be effective when applied pre-emptively and selectively, and when their 'level', i.e. the brutality of security forces, did not surpass a certain threshold (cf., Rogers 2011). Otherwise, they risked mobilizing even more opposition in what has been termed the "backlash effect" (Francisco 2005: 58f). Protest, on the other hand, was found to be relatively more successful in terms of achieving compromises when it stayed largely non-violent (Davenport 2007).

Little, however, has been said about the role that the interpretation of events on the ground plays in this nexus. Competing narratives and discourses articulated by contending actors of a struggle, making sense of and giving purpose to contentious events, rarely figure in the equation. Scholars inspired by constructivism, or rooted in post-structuralism and hegemony theory, and hence interested in the discursive dimension of contentious politics, are thus confronted with blind spots when it comes to the shifting nature and effects of the "language of revolt and oppression."

Towards an Integrated Perspective on Contentious Politics

This is despite the fact that production and interpretation of protest events are closely interlinked. Truth about the material world at our disposition is produced under a controlled environment by dominant social, political and economic forces and depends both on the scientific discourse as well as on the institution which seeks to produce and promote it (Foucault 2001: 132). Injustices committed by institutions hence "do not automatically produce protests but must instead be interpreted or framed in ways that inspire individuals to act collectively in response to the threat" (Khawaja 1993: 52). Hess & Martin (2006: 250f), as well as Opp & Roehl (1990: 540) argue that ultimately any state action is able to mobilize opposition if it is considered illegitimate or disproportionate by a critical mass with regard to their expectation of how authorities should behave. However, this creation of 'myths and martyrs' (Della Porta 2006: 161) is not an automatism. As part of the political power struggle, social movements and regime elites constantly frame protest and repression events with competing meanings in order to claim moral authority: regimes vilify demonstrators in order to undercut their base of support and legitimize repressive action. Demonstrators, on the other hand, use rhetorical strategies to create resonance and legitimacy for their goals and mobilize potential sympathisers. Hence truth and knowledge about contentious events do not exist outside of power, they always involve the privileging of one particular perspective over another (Foucault 1970: 52f). Also they can never refrain from exerting power themselves on the course of a contentious cycle.

Can we capture the socio-psychological process of "meaning-making" without either reinventing the wheel of social movement studies, or withdrawing from the discipline and into the field of post-structuralist and discourse theory (e.g., Foucault 1970; Laclau & Mouffe 1985)? I believe so. In fact, it seems that the above described lacking theorization of the link between materiality and perceptions of contention largely stems from a commonly constructed dichotomy between structural (the opportunities and constraints imposed by geography, social hierarchies, formal and social institutions, collective history and memory, economic need, etc.) and actor-oriented (self-reliant action choices and behaviour of individual or collective author subjects) causes of social mobilization. This dualism, however, lacks analytical precision, as political opportunity for new action does not automatically arise out of a given structural context, but is always embedded in concrete material experiences and dependent on certain narrative or symbolic structures (which, in turn, presuppose agency).

A way out of the structure-agency bind comes to the fore, if we think the visible interaction between movements and institutions as structured contingency – and through a framing perspective (cf., Snow et al. 2014:31–35). Taking a mediating position between structural and cultural approaches, the concept of framing provides a useful means to study the interpretive and communicative micro-processes that operate concurrently to, and partly condition the physical interactions of institutions and contenders. However, we have to go further in understanding frames than asserting their diagnostic and their strategic and motivational dimension. Framing can be conceptualized as symbolical labour that structures the social world surrounding us in a meaningful way (cf., Hall 1982:64; Snow et al. 1986; Entman 1993:52; Benford and Snow 2000:613). Yet, it can be conceived of more productively, too: adopting a broader framework of analysis that no longer excludes or blurs the affective meaning work and symbolic production by contending actors, we may think of framing as a "translation mechanism".

Situated at the juncture between observable material events and subjective action choices, contested interpretations then account for variances in the reaction of social movements to regime action, and of potentially mobilizable publics to both protest and repression. Depending on which rival interpretations emerge as nodes structuring discourse, and are thus able to affect people's "hearts and minds" (Koopmans 2005:161), institutions' and movements' actions may either inspire backlash, create new discursive opportunities for further repression, or effect both. This ideational effect, or more concretely, the "variation of choices across cases" due to the "variation in the content of actors' cognitions" can, in fact, be traced through careful process analysis, as Jacoobs (2015: 44) has demonstrated.

Such a conception of frames in the interaction between movements and institutions can advance our understanding on a) the function of different visual, linguistic and textual representations by social movements of their environment, that is, whether they serve to mobilize solidarity and maintain the movement's internal coherence or act as a motivating mechanism to stimulate collective action; b) the ability of certain representations to align, resonate and generate legitimacy; and, most importantly, c) the relationship of strategic communication modes by contending groups to each other, and to their common material world more broadly. In conclusion, changes in discourse and framing systems around contentious events effectively *cause* changes in the behaviour of institutions and movements towards each other. However, this does not preclude the inverse causal link. Both levels interact with each other: the material composition of protest and repression constantly affect the conditions for framing initiatives. It sets the boundaries for reasonable discourse. Sanctioned discourse, in turn, is part of the process by which contenders assess the costs and benefits of their available options of collective action strategies. In this light, my attempt is modest: to highlight that changing narratives and interpretative structures around physical events provide an essential context for interpreting diverging findings on interaction effects in contentious dynamics – and hence to bring back the discursive dimension into the study of contentious politics.

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*This is the sixth post in the **blog series „Movements and Institutions"**. Check out the introductory post for more information on the series and click here for all contributions.*
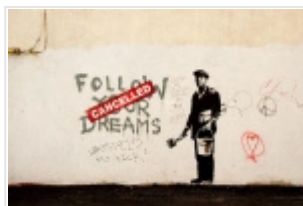

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