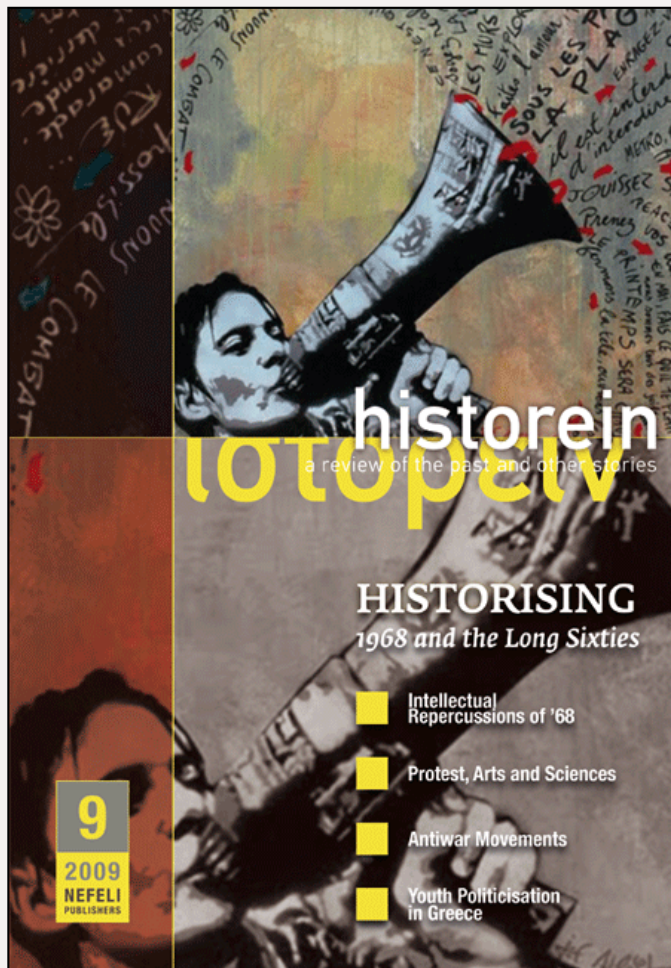


## Historein

Vol. 9, 2009



### 1968 as an Epistemological Catalyst: Contentious Politics and Antinomies in the Study of Social Movements

Seferiades Seraphim Panteion University  
<https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.26>

Copyright © 2012 Seraphim Seferiades

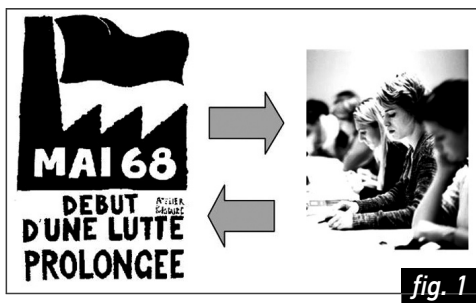


#### To cite this article:

Seferiades, S. (2010). 1968 as an Epistemological Catalyst: Contentious Politics and Antinomies in the Study of Social Movements. *Historein*, 9, 101-115. doi:<https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.26>

The focus of this paper is on epistemology, specifically on the impact contentious 1968 has had on the way we analyse and appraise collective action. Seeking insights on both movement dynamics as well as their theoretical implications, I purport to assess their interdependence by asking how 1968 influenced social movement theory, and the obverse: How did theory shape the lenses through which we perceive and analyse social movements (as depicted in Figure 1). The way I go about doing it is by scrutinising a new – and novel – literature in political sociology that came about in the process, *Contentious Politics*, on its own cognitive grounds (in Part I).

# *1968 as an Epistemological Catalyst: Contentious Politics and Antinomies in the Study of Social Movements*



1968 and social movement studies

My take on the topic can be gleaned from my subtitle, pivoting around the Kantian term ‘antinomy’, asymptotic reasoning and argumentation (a notion I return to *infra*). I claim that 1968 endowed us not only with a vibrant new method for studying collective action and social movements, but also with the powerful negative legacy (or, shall I say, the curse) of antinomic thinking templates. Coping with this legacy’s adverse consequences is the paper’s second goal (in Part II).

**Seraphim Seferiades**

Panteion University

*I*

As an approach, Contentious Politics focuses primarily on claim-making. According to the most recent formulation by field co-founders Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, it concerns claims bearing on someone else's interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programmes, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties.<sup>1</sup>

Comprising political action for socioeconomic, politico-institutional and/or symbolic-cultural reform that would, if implemented, improve the claimants' access to the political system, Contentious Politics is principally about 'unofficial' politics: politics which – though in constant and dense interaction with the state and other official bodies – is primarily extra-, or supra-institutional. 'Challengers', i.e., political actors that make claims, typically lack routine access to the political system, government agents and resources.<sup>2</sup>

To illuminate the relevant processes involved, several causal mechanisms are conceptualised through which collective subjects become constituted, with a capacity to

- formulate coherent political discourses;
- build social networks and functional organisations; and
- navigate through constantly fluctuating political opportunity structures

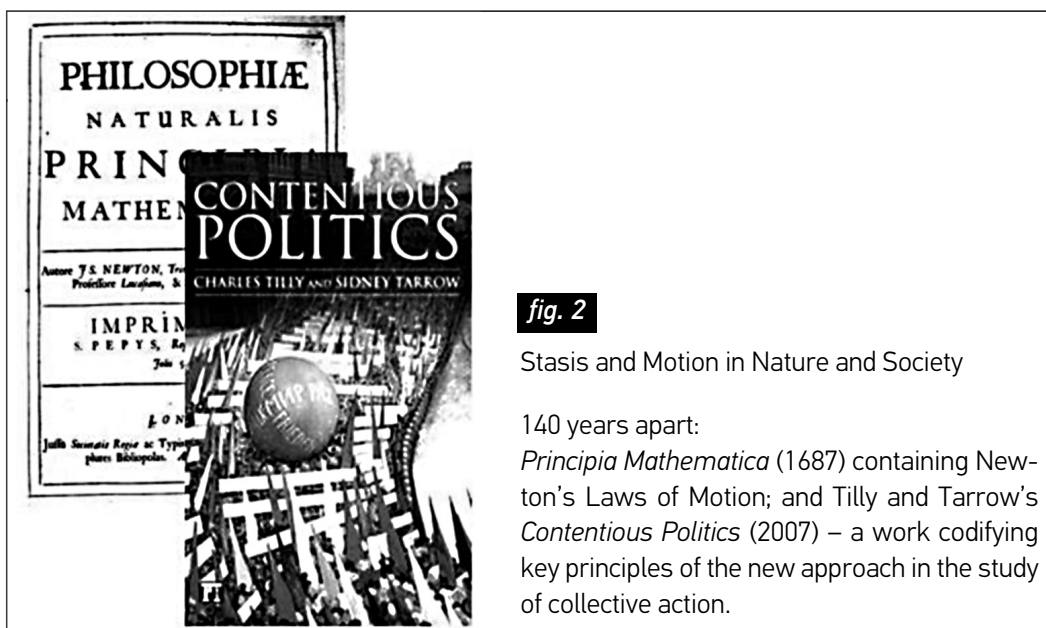
in order to promote their material, ideological and/or cultural interests and identities against opponents possessing superior material and institutional resources.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps slightly exaggerating, I am paralleling the impact Contentious Politics has had on how the social sciences conceive and research collective action to that exerted on the natural sciences by the Renaissance critique of classical Aristotelian dynamics. As is well known, the latter was based on the view that the natural state of bodies is *stasis* – hence, what required explanation was motion. With the advent of Galileo and, even more so, Newton, this fundamental axiom was turned on its head. According to Newton's *First Law of Motion*, every body in a state of uniform motion tends to remain in that state unless an external force is applied to it. To wit, whereas before Newton the objective was to explain motion, after him the goal was reversed – into explaining stasis rather than movement. In what ways did Contentious Politics bring about something comparable?

In conventional social and political science (especially as practiced in the 1950s and early 1960s), collective action was mostly approached as an instance of politically extraneous *anomie*: phenomena reflecting aberration, disorientation and social decomposition. Within this vast archipelago of perpetually 'emergent' phenomena, social movements were seen as merely the most visible expression of processes that were essentially prepolitical, pathological and ultimately irrational. Naturally, in such a context, the key question posed concerned *Why? Why these pathological instances?*

Contentious Politics radically changed all that. To the extent that societies are marred by structural domination, professed the new approach, not only is contention natural and unexceptional, but it constitutes a key coordinate of politics and social life as a whole. Like the Newtonian over-

haul of Aristotelian research priorities, this ‘normalisation of collective protest’<sup>4</sup> utterly transformed the character of the central research queries posed – from *Why conflict?* to its exact opposite *Whence the lack of conflict?* As a result, hitherto neglected aspects of the collective action universe (instrumental as well as expressive) were brought to the forefront of scholarly attention, laying the foundation for a new progressive research programme and a positive heuristics (in Lakatos’ sense).<sup>5</sup> The overall – normative – appraisal of collective action was also transformed in the process. As Charles Tilly famously observed, order rather than anarchy is what principally characterises contentious collective action.



**fig. 2**

Stasis and Motion in Nature and Society

140 years apart:

*Principia Mathematica* (1687) containing Newton’s Laws of Motion; and Tilly and Tarrow’s *Contentious Politics* (2007) – a work codifying key principles of the new approach in the study of collective action.

Contentious Politics as a discipline was born out of this new understanding – building specialised concepts, robust generalisations, and theory on the basis of a perspicacious four-fold partition of the field into:

- political opportunities;
  - collective action repertoires;
  - cultural framings;
- and
- organisational structures.

For each and every aspect, original ideas and concepts emerged organising and orientating research.

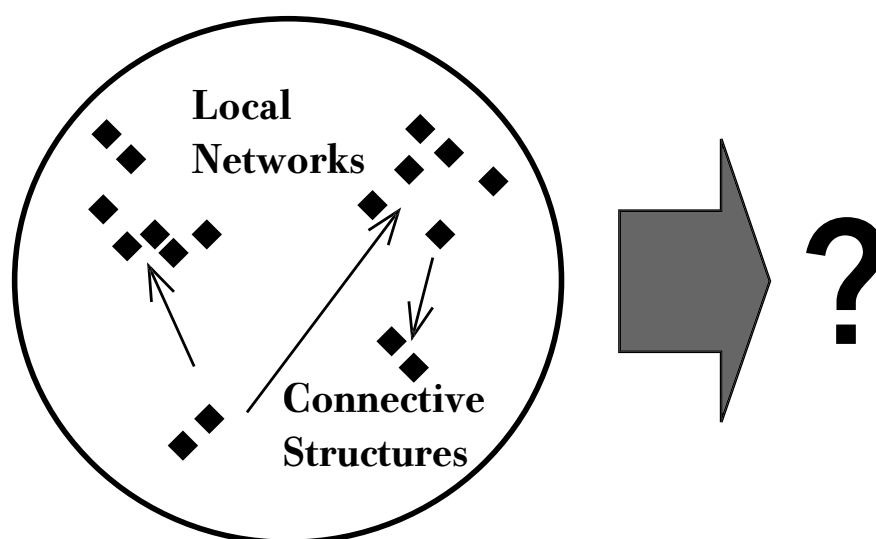
In *political opportunities*, examining the ways the socio-political environment (including both consolidated structures and short-term, transitory conjuncture) impinges upon collective action, critical dimensions include (a) the degree of claimant access to the political system; (b) fluctuations in the repressive capacity of the state; (c) divisions within the elites; and (d) availability of influential allies.

## 1968 as an Epistemological Catalyst

In *repertoires* we encounter the historical sociology of collective action (depicting the transition from the more parochial *traditional* to the modular *modern* repertoire) and a suggestive continuum of modal forms of protest ranging from (a) *violence* (visible, dramatic, but frustratingly ineffective) to (b) militant *disruption* (the archetypical form social movements employ – generally effective but difficult to maintain for long periods of time) to (c) *conventional* forms (easy to use but drawing collective action into contractual blandness).

Building upon the work of Erving Goffman,<sup>6</sup> the analysis of *frames* – interpretative schemata that enable individuals “to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large”<sup>7</sup> – is concerned with the ideational elements of collective action, i.e., shared meanings and definitions “people bring to their situation”.<sup>8</sup> Realising that social movements have to strike a difficult balance between “inherited symbols that are familiar, but lead to passivity, and new ones that are electrifying, but may be too unfamiliar to lead to action”,<sup>9</sup> Snow and his associates conceptualised a variety of “frame alignment” processes – whereby the interpretative frameworks of individuals and social movement organisations (SMOs) are linked. *Bridging*, *amplification*, and *extension* summon to action on the basis of existing values,<sup>10</sup> whilst *transformation* jettisons old beliefs in favour of new ones (reframing).

Researching *organisation*, finally, involves charting past forms whilst also trying to adumbrate the political and operational logic underpinning them. The exercise is particularly consequential for contemporary emergent phenomena, materialising as they are within the overall framework set by such historic forms. The findings are captured in another historical continuum ranging from (a) strict hierarchy (the original social democratic model of seeking SMOs as a fully functioning ‘state within the State’) to (b) *networks* (an altogether different way of thinking about organisation – aspiring to combine autonomy with practical co-ordination) (Figure 3) to (c) fully autonomous, semi-fluid structures proclaiming a capacity to uncompromisingly reflect and further spontaneous militancy.



**fig. 3** Decentralised organisational modality

In light of this stunning multifacetedness of the phenomenon, the theory also criticises the drawbacks of approaching organisation from too narrow a perspective, exclusively as ‘formal organisation’. Such ‘institutionalised’ instances (including trade unions, political groups and other SMO varieties) are obviously essential in the organisational universe. There exist, however, at least two other meanings of the term and pertinent research loci: ‘organisation’ as forms of combination for purposes of conducting specific struggles – at the point where claimants clash with their opponents – (such as, e.g., strike committees, ad hoc delegations, neighbourhood militias, etc.); and organisation reflecting supportive networks – ‘connective structures’ – that link the expressed and visible form with both its actual *and* potential social bases. It is this third, conspicuously under-researched level that allows movements to persist in anticipation of new opportunities long after the exhaustion of their contentious apexes.

It merits attention that though this analytical slicing of the contentious universe is primarily intended as a heuristic device (it is duly understood that collective action and social movements emerge *combining all* of these dimensions), it has helped focus attention on discreet aspects of the phenomena at hand, thereby facilitating synthetic treatments. Accordingly, violence, disruption and convention do not characterise collective subjects but solely collective action *forms* that may be employed by several groups at once or by any one group or subject in concert (SMOs typically mix militant extra-legal action with conventional petitions). Static slicing is not intended to compartmentalise analysis but, on the contrary, enrich and facilitate more dynamic and synthetic renderings. This can be gleaned in analyses deliberately focusing on movement performance during times when collective action is intensified, the so-called “cycles of contention”. According to Tarrow’s classic formulation, these are periods of heightened conflict across the social system with a rapid diffusion of collective action from more-mobilised to less-mobilised sectors; a rapid pace of innovation in the forms of contention; the creation of new or transformed collective action frames; a combination of organised and unorganised participation; and sequences of intensified information flow and interaction between challengers and authorities.<sup>11</sup>

During the apex of a robust contentious cycle (such as 1968) it seems that anything is possible and the world will be transformed (what Aristide Zolberg famously described as “moments of madness”),<sup>12</sup> but demobilisation almost invariably and inevitably follows. It is the combined result of claimant exhaustion and the ensuing polarisation within the ranks of the movement between those advocating moderation and those demanding militant escalation. Not surprisingly, the state plays a key role in the process, facilitating the moderate wing whilst repressing the radicals. As the former become institutionalised, the latter tend to drift into violent action that more often than not exacerbates their isolation, accelerating demobilisation. The tactic usually works, but under certain circumstances (e.g., the perpetual elite inability to implement reforms, lack of sufficient carrots to supplement the sticks, excessive violence on the part of the coercive apparatus, etc.) contentious cycles may spiral out of control all the way to producing revolutionary events and/or outcomes. For that to happen, however, the role of movement leadership is essential.

Equally crucial, however, has been a second contribution of the Contentious Politics literature, pertaining to the *relational ontology* of social movements – conceiving and studying them nei-

ther as preordained necessities implementing some 'logic of history', nor the opposite: the view that movements disappear because their alleged structural prerequisites have become eclipsed. Instead, as Tilly and Tarrow have argued, collective subjects and social movements are not essentialist entities – derivable from without, but *relational outcomes*: the product of strategic action and conscious intervention.

In all of the key texts produced after 2001 (when *The Dynamics of Contention* was published), the relational approach sought to highlight and employ qualities found in all the major social scientific persuasions prevalent at the turn of the century whilst avoiding aspects deemed to be problematic. Such was the case with traditional *structuralism* (envisioning unitary, anthropomorphic systems with laws of their own); *rational choice* (theorising a universe of individual actors with self-serving utilitarian goals); *phenomenology* (hypostatizing culture as it inhabits the individual) and *culturalism* (viewing culture as a normative and essentially determinist macrostructure at the expense of other behavioural dimensions).<sup>13</sup>

By subsuming structuralist, rationalist and culturalist qualities under its distinctly relational epistemology, Contentious Politics has taken *social relationships* and *transactions* as the starting point of description and explanation, whilst causality is seen as operating largely within the realm of interaction. For instance, "political and legal institutions shape and transform the collective consciousness and disposition of social groups, while collective action shapes and transforms power structures and political-legal institutions".<sup>14</sup> Or, as Tilly and Tarrow put it aphoristically: "Instead of studying only 'protest', 'collective action', or 'social movements', . . . examine contentious politics as the interaction among challengers, their opponents, interested third parties, the media, and more."<sup>15</sup>

One crucial upshot of the above is that transformative collective action and social movements are not essentialist entities (that either exist or are absent) but the product of deliberate political intervention. When successful – capable of interpreting and successfully expressing structural and environmental conditions and circumstance – such interventions are able to foster movements and robust interpellations of defective contemporary arrangements; *and* the opposite: if less than adequate, such materialisation is impossible. We may well think of this theoretical conclusion as paraphrasis of the well-known Marxian dictum: Men and women do not quite choose the conditions under which they make themselves; nevertheless it is they who are the makers of their own history.



There can be no question, then, that Contentious Politics as a subfield of political sociology has a lot of merit. Equally indisputable, however, is that it is marred by vexing problems and internal dilemmas: the *antinomies* I referred to at the outset of the paper. Before proceeding it is important to briefly reflect on the meaning of this perplexing term.

A standard lexical definition of antinomy is "contradiction between two apparently equally valid principles or between inferences correctly drawn from such principles".<sup>16</sup> According to Kant,

with whom the term is usually associated, antinomies are the result of applying to the universe of pure thought categories or criteria of reason proper to the universe of sensible perception or experience (phenomena).<sup>17</sup> Typical antinomies include the view that the universe has a beginning fixed in time and space vs. perennial being; the theory that the whole consists of indivisible atoms (whereas, in fact, none such exist); and the problem of freedom vs. universal causality.

For the subject-matter at hand, collective action and social movements, antinomies may be said to exist when internally coherent but mutually incompatible and/or contradictory views coexist, developing in isolation from one another, without any communication or practical exchange. Though apparently innocuous, the proliferation of such antinomic loci within the body (let alone the conceptual and theoretical core) of a discipline threaten it with relativism and, through that, cognitive cynicism. To put it bluntly, if mutually incompatible views appear to thrive as equally valid, why bother with conceptual and theoretical adjudication? Needless to mention, this undermines scholarly communication, critical debate and cognitive cumulativeness – the hallmark of all systematic scholarship.

In the remainder of this article I detect and critique five such antinomies that permeate large chunks of Contentious Politics theorising. Whilst the first three deal with more fundamental issues, related either to general methodology or epistemology (i.e., the nature of the knowledge we seek when researching collective action and social movements), the last two are instances of more proximate, specialised theorising. Specifically:

- a. How to adjudicate between sensible but mutually incompatible responses to the question *What is* (and *What is not*) a social movement?
- b. Given that Contentious Politics is a 'partial theory', how does it relate (if at all) to Grand Theory?
- c. Relatedly, regarding the distinction subject vs. object of study: is activism incompatible with Contentious Politics scholarship or is it perhaps a prerequisite?

And two more, preoccupied with problems emerging – as it were – from within Contentious Politics:

- d. Does collective action reflect 'rational' (qua utilitarian) calculi, or is it rather the product of culture and expressive impulses?
- e. Finally, the old but resilient dilemma structure vs. action: are social movements the product of structural determination or the result of deliberate strategic action?

It is possible to argue, of course, that the nature and internal articulation of the antinomic dimensions identified is less obvious or straightforward than I make them appear. It is a criticism I readily accept. A measure of arbitrariness cannot be ruled out, whilst I rush to add that the list of antinomies presented is far from exhaustive. All the same – and this is my prosaic retort – the dilemmas I single out have all been key themes in the social sciences at least since 1968 (when some of the pertinent debates came to a head), and are still in need of constant re-examination.

But let me turn to examining the antinomies. The first concerns what is perhaps the most basic issue of all – the definition of social movements.



## II

## A

One pronounced legacy of '68 thinking has been the aversion to allegedly 'static' defining.<sup>18</sup> Reality is so complex and multifarious, runs the argument, that definitions inevitably 'freeze' and impoverish it. Invariably, however, this line of thinking has proven to be a destructive overkill; and the reason is simple: failing to define an entity – including social movements – perpetually undermines our capacity to theorise it. Perhaps I might illustrate the nature of the problem with a couple of personal examples.

A few months ago I was appointed external PhD committee member for a thesis in the field of labour and trade union history and politics. Its author was referring, among other things, to recent literature dealing with social movements. Although generally erudite and systematic, however, he had failed to cite a number of key texts in Contentious Politics – which I duly pointed out to him. At that point, however, another member of the committee intervened to argue that the candidate's decision to consider trade unionism as an instance of social movements was misguided in the first place since, as he claimed, social movement theory can be fruitfully deployed only for the analysis of phenomena such as environmentalism, anti-war campaigns, sexual identity, etc. (i.e., the so-called 'new social movements'). There and then we were faced with a crucial dilemma, one that lots of other researchers regularly have to cope with: are we to consider trade unionism and other 'old' movements (especially the labour movement) as *movements* or not? Another interesting case in point comes from the electronic list supporting activities of the Contentious Politics seminars run at Columbia University by the late Charles Tilly. For about two weeks in November 2006 discussions centred on a topic brought about by a young colleague, Kumru Toktamis, at the time teaching a class on social movements at Brooklyn College. This is what she wrote in an email on 11 November 2006: "Now as I am grading reaction papers on social movements and social agents, over and over again students write that they disagree with my point that gangs are *not* social movements; 'because [they] are loosely organised groups of people [who] share a common name, symbols and colours and come together for social reasons', as one student reflects."

The dilemma seen in the case of trade unionism reappeared here under a different guise: If we exclude street gangs from the extension of 'social movements', aren't we unduly impoverishing our subject matter? On the other hand, if we include them, aren't we exposing ourselves to the opposite risk – of over-stretching the concept by implying that each and every form of collective action is a social movement?

The reason I am mentioning these examples is neither to suggest one definitive answer nor, of course, to pit one view against another. It is, rather, to critique the way the debate is being conducted – which, I think, is also partly to blame for the confusion that mars many discussions. To start with, the problem is *not* that we have a variety of differing views on what to include/exclude in the empirical denotation of social movements; this is both understandable (indeed inevitable) and potentially fruitful. It lies, rather, in that the contending arguments presented pay only lip service (if at all) to the issue of systematically defining (*conceptualising*) *social movements*: Oth-

erwise put, our overall theorising lacks serious discussion about what to consider *defining, sine qua non* properties of the concept ‘social movements’.<sup>19</sup> This is a dismal state of affairs for the simple reason that until and unless we tackle the definitional issue (settle the concept’s intension), we cannot be confident about either what we are to study under ‘social movements’ or the generalisations our analyses lead to. Needless to mention, all this is a predictor of poor theory. The whole situation brings to mind Sartori’s well-known cat–dog analogy: a PhD candidate wins a million dollar fellowship to test the hypothesis that cat-dogs emit the sound bow-wow. As his research refutes it, he is forced to change the hypothesis into meow-meow, only to see it refuted once more. Frustrated and desperate, he turns to the oracle at Delphi, where Pythea eventually lets him know that his problem has nothing to do with empirical research but, rather, with his stupid concept: “My friend, the oracle says, to you I shall speak the simple truth, which simply is that the cat-dog *does not exist*’.”<sup>20</sup>

The moral of the story is that if we conceptualise movements as cat-dogs (allowing in the denotation NGOs, street gangs, single-issue temporary associations, etc.) and then attempt to theorise them, we will soon discover that what is valid for one form is not for the next. In short, before we set out to explicate or interpret a phenomenon we need to have first delimited it as a distinct entity.

So what are we referring to when using the term ‘social movements’? Once again, the point is not to settle the question definitively, but rather suggest key properties that need occupy us in our discussions.

Cardinal among them is *duration* (and durability) in claim-making which immediately calls attention to its several prerequisites: apposite collective action forms; suitable cultural frames and political discourse; appropriate public displays – Tilly’s famous WUNC syndrome of Worthiness, Unity, Numbers, and Commitment – as well as, perhaps, claims that are social and political (rather than merely personal).<sup>21</sup> Disagreement about which properties to include is of course likely to persist. But if we organise the discussion in an orderly way, communication will be facilitated (if only by clarifying points of disagreement so as to avoid *ignoratia elenchi*) and we may even discover that consensus is actually within reach.

Approaching the topic by way of defining principles also sets us free from the naïve a-historical essentialism implicit in several analyses. If we build our understanding on the basis of properties (defining and accompanying), we can cease worrying about whether or not specific subjects such as trade unionism are movements or not, and begin evaluating them on the basis of historically concrete performances. Sometimes we will be inclined to include them, sometimes not – but we will know *why*. This is rarely realised, but theoretical flexibility presupposes conceptual clarity.

## **B**

The second antinomy I detect concerns theoretical ontology: the nature of the theory we need and ought to be building.

A well-known legacy of 1968 is the ambivalence between radical humanism and structuralism. The former, fomenting and fostering – among other things – critical ethnography, feminist criticism and generic poststructuralism sided with decentred views of reality and theory-making in favour of partial theorising, whilst the latter tended to cling on to modernist master narratives (grand theory). What is distinctive about Contentious Politics as a literature is that it emerged from mainstream structuralism to develop a partial theory. The rift between the two forms of theorising however – general and partial – has remained unresolved. Indeed, over the years, the opposition appears to have stiffened. But does it have to be this way? Let me try explaining why I think not.

This is rarely noticed, but all general theories (including Marxism) remain abstract and suspended without the support of partial theories capable of explicating concrete aspects of the problems at hand; tracing and reconstructing concrete causal mechanisms and processes; and formulating empirically testable (and falsifiable) hypotheses. Equally true, however (though far less readily recognised in poststructuralist thinking), is also the obverse: If general theories lacking support from appropriate partial ones appear abstract and suspended, partial ones without a capacity to key in their micro-level findings and propositions into larger, more 'general' theoretical debates remain fragmentary and incomplete.

The two projects are obviously complementary, yet they are being perceived as incompatible opposites. Why so? The reason is primarily methodological – stemming from the inability of both camps (the holistic structuralist as well as the decentred partialist) to move along a ladder of abstraction – from the general to the concrete and vice versa. The prejudice is transmitted via a misguided sense of loss to the presumed theoretical adversary: those who operate on a low level of abstraction (at the micro-level) feel threatened by macroscopic theorising whilst the macro-structuralists view the partial as inherently deficient and limited.

But all this leads to sclerotic absurdities: as if someone insists on using continental maps for exploring a city, and city maps for travelling through continents – refusing to combine them and use what is needed for each appropriate task. In the circumstances, it is not an exaggeration to suggest that overcoming this antinomy may be a *sine qua non* prerequisite for genuine theoretical progress.

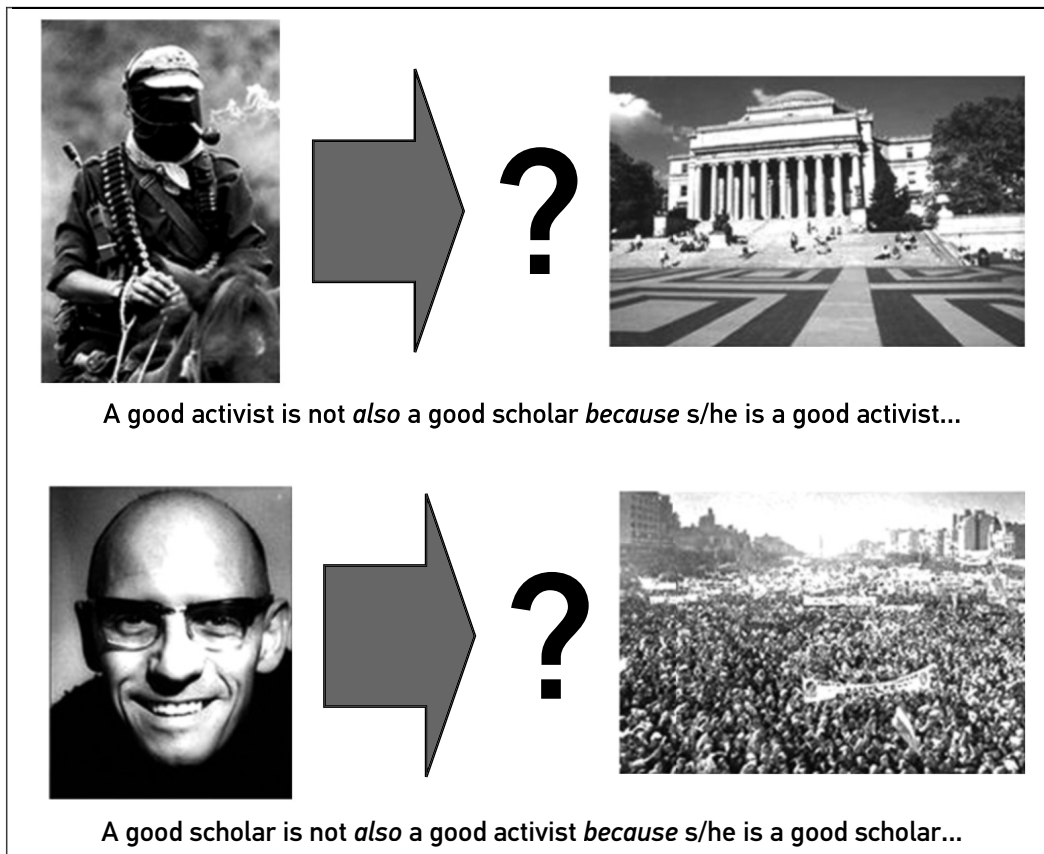
### C

The third antinomy concerns the cognitive prerequisites of collective action scholarship, in the form of the rift between activism and 'neutral' science. In operational terms, the question is: What is the relationship between political engagement and scholarship? This is obviously an enormous question at least going back to the famous Thesis XI: The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways, the point, however, is to *change* it.

That there must be opposition between activist and scholar in the study of social movements comes as a surprise especially in view of the fact that the vast majority of Contentious Politics theorists got started in their academic study of collective action as an extension of practical po-

litical engagement. On the other hand, it is also quite evident that scholarly work has far-reaching political implications. Whence does the antinomy arise then?

I think it stems from the rather simplistic rendering of the relationship between politics and scholarship that '68 has bequeathed us – whereby political analysis is assumed to be but the uninterpreted extension of scholarship and vice versa. Though obviously related, however, the two differ: the scholar's concerns, idiom, and overall cognitive template are quite distinct from those of the activist. Here I think it helps to restate the problem aphoristically: A good activist is not also a good scholar simply because he or she is a good activist, and the opposite – which scholars have a rather hard time comprehending: a good scholar is definitely *not* a good activist, simply because he or she is a good scholar.



**fig. 4** Scholarship and activism

Or, to put it bluntly, what good is it to the activist a scholar who approaches activism merely as yet another activist, without making his/her specialised knowledge bear on the subject? And the obverse: How can scholarship benefit from the experience of the activist if s/he merely adopts scholarly jargon? I pose these rhetorical questions simply in order to argue that for the activist to be useful to the scholar, s/he has to remain true to his/her identity as an activist and vice versa: for the scholar to be useful to the activist, s/he has to remain a scholar (constantly conceptual-

ising problems, constantly formulating and testing hypotheses *sine ira et studio*).

Assuming – as I do – that scholars and activists need to stay in touch and learn from each other, the two roles need, nonetheless, to remain distinct, ‘translating’ and adapting features for their mutual experience in order to render it operable by and useful for the other party. Such ‘translating’ may turn out to be quite a task, but it is our only way to transcend the antinomy’s distressing effects, whereby activists speak, think and act like novice academics and academics behave like inept – sometimes very inept – politicians.

#### **D**

The fourth antinomy centres on the character of collective action, enquiring whether it is instrumental or expressive. In a roundabout way this also influences the way we approach the study of movement outcomes.<sup>22</sup> Judging whether or not a collective action or a social movement is/has been ‘successful’ requires profound understanding of the – manifest and latent – objectives pursued.

The dichotomy came to a head with the upsurge of postmaterial values and demands on both sides of the Atlantic in the 60s and 70s,<sup>23</sup> but nowadays it is being kept alive artificially due to – what I think – is excessive and exorbitant rhetoric. In particular it is argued *either* that culture is instrumentally void (the *phenomenological* view whereby movements resemble bare fists hitting on a knife), or the exact opposite, that all purposive action is culturally void (hence all collective action is instrumental and all actors fully and accurately informed utilitarians).

The glaring lacuna that none of the two strong versions of the respective arguments appear to realise, however, is their near-total lack of empirical grounding. The arguments usually marshalled are axioms rather than empirical generalisations, whilst a further complication is the normative outlook that the theses often adopt (suggesting not what collective action *is* but, rather, what it *ought to be*). It is neither possible nor necessary to provide the missing empirical evidence, however, in order to argue that the antinomic sclerosis is both misplaced and counter-productive. Expressive action evidently requires a functional space premised on strategic effectiveness, whilst even the most crudely utilitarian versions of instrumentalism reflect values and culturally derived means of adjudication. To wit, it is far more reasonable to hypothesise that movements are *both* instrumental *and* expressive.

#### **E**

The last antinomy I detect centres on the old juxtaposition between structure and action: Is collective action an instance of socio-structural over-determination, or must we rather conceive and study it as a product of conscious strategic intervention?

The distinction is as widespread as it is misguided. Eminently ‘material’ as they may be, structures do not really prejudge, nor are they of course in a position to ‘produce’ anything by themselves. In E. P. Thompson’s memorable phrase, structures are ‘eventuated’ through action that

is in part strategic, in part cultural, and which – though attuned to concrete structural environments – cannot and should be not reduced to them.<sup>24</sup> Equally spurious, of course, is to approach action as if it were taking place in a structural vacuum.

The problem, in other words, is *reductionism*: either of action to structure or the obverse. The need, instead, to study carefully *both* spheres with an eye to meaningful synthesis is easy to proclaim but difficult to carry through.

Contentious Politics (especially its relational epistemology) provides concrete examples of how to overcome the dilemmas involved. Political opportunities (and threats), Mc Adam et al. argue, “cannot be automatically read from . . . objective changes”.<sup>25</sup> They have to be “perceived, constructed, and carefully balanced against” opposite forces and interpretative frameworks. They tellingly dub the operation “From Opportunity Structure to Attribution of Threat and Opportunity”, whilst something similar holds true with respect to the transition “From Mobilising Structures to Social Appropriation”. In both cases strategic actors are *sine qua non* analytical factors; what makes them so, however, is their position within structures – implementing, amplifying or reversing structural propensities.



The protestors of 1968 did not win the practical demands they put forth immediately – social movements rarely do. Nevertheless, the protest cycle they unleashed exerted enormous influence on all spheres of public life including the academic study of collective action. The new scholarly environment that emerged as a result was marked by the active presence and intervention of a new generation of scholars, progressively coming to supplant the disapproving lenses through which conventional social science had been examining collective action and social movements. Contentious Politics as a disciplinary field was born in that context. In adumbrating its main features, this contribution has tried to specify the nature of the environmental influence by highlighting important developments as well as antinomic blind spots and difficulties that need revisiting. Assessing accomplishments but also recognising lacunas is also part of the legacy of 1968.

## NOTES

- 1 Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, Boulder/London: Paradigm, 2007, p. 4.
- 2 Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001, p. 12.
- 3 The literature is too voluminous to meaningfully summarise here. Key texts that must be mentioned, however, include, on political process, the pioneering works by Charles Tilly (*From Mobilization to Revolution*, Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1978 and *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758–1834*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1995) and Doug McAdam (*Political Opportunity and the Development of*

## 1968 as an Epistemological Catalyst

- Black Insurgency, 1930–1970*, Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1982/1999) as well as the influential article by John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald on resource mobilisation theory (“Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial ‘Theory’”, *American Journal of Sociology* 82: (1977): 1212–1241). The textbook by Sidney Tarrow (*Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994/1998) is rightfully considered a classic, whilst similarly effective and widely read have been the volume edited by Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald (*Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) and the introductory synthesis by Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani (*Social Movements: An Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999). A turning point in the evolution of the field has been the publication of the book by Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly (*Dynamics of Contention*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), whilst Tilly and Tarrow’s *Contentious Politics* – already cited – codifies and further develops the most important insights of three decades of Contentious Politics scholarship. Useful readers include: Doug McAdam, David A. Snow (eds), *Social Movements: Readings on their Emergence, Mobilization, and Dynamics*, Los Angeles: Roxbury, 1997); David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, Hanspeter Kriesi (eds), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004; and Jeff Goodwin, J. M. Jasper (eds), *The Social Movements Reader: Cases and Concepts*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2003. For a more extensive presentation of the literature, see Seraphim Seferiades, “Contentious Politics, Collective Action, Social Movements: An Impression”, *Greek Political Science Review* 27 (2006): 7–42.
- 4 Frances Fox Piven, Richard Cloward, “Normalizing Collective Protest”, in Aldon D. Morris, Carol McClurg Mueller (eds), *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1992, pp. 301–25.
  - 5 According to Imre Lakatos (*The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes: Philosophical Papers Volume 1*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978, pp. 33, 48) “progressive” (as opposed to “degenerative”) is the research programme that manages to resolve the empirical anomalies it encounters by generating theories and propositions “with excess empirical content over its predecessors”. This usually involves “theoretically progressive problemshifts”: fruitful new ways of approaching old problems (positive heuristics).
  - 6 Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, Boston: Northeastern UP, 1974 [1986].
  - 7 David A. Snow, E. Burke Rochford, Steven Worden and Robert D. Benford, “Frame Alignment Process, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation”, in Doug McAdam, David, A. Snow, *Social Movements*, pp. 235–251.
  - 8 McAdam et al., *Dynamics of Contention*, p. 5.
  - 9 Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, p. 107.
  - 10 ‘Bridging’ entails the explicit linkage of ideologically congruent but previously unconnected frames; ‘amplification’ the clarification and invigoration of existing frames; and ‘extension’ the addition of new symbols to a basic ideational core.
  - 11 Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, p. 142. I have applied elements of this theoretical position to the analysis of the Greek July events of 1965. One element I found wanting was the lack of a specific treatment of the impact of strategic action. This is a problem, however, that can be easily remedied – via closer scrutiny to policy content rather than merely framing activities. See Seraphim Seferiades, «Συλλογικές

- δράσεις, κινηματικές πρακτικές: η «σύντομη» δεκαετία του '60 ως «συγκρουσιακός κύκλος», in Alkis Rigos, Seraphim Seferiades, Evanthis Hatzivassiliou (eds), *Η «σύντομη» δεκαετία του '60: θεσμικό πλαίσιο, κομματικές στρατηγικές, κοινωνικές συγκρούσεις, πολιτισμικές διεργασίες*, Athens: Kastaniotis, 2007, pp. 57–77.
- 12 Aristide Zolberg, "Moments of Madness", *Politics and Society* 2 (1972): 183–207.
- 13 For an excellent depiction of these trends, sensitive both to their promise as well as their blind spots, see the collection of essays edited by Mark Irving Lichbach and Alan S. Zuckerman (eds), *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture, and Structure*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.
- 14 Seraphim Seferiades, "The Coercive Impulse: Policing Labour in Interwar Greece", *Journal of Contemporary History* 40:1 (2005): 55.
- 15 Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, p. 69.
- 16 Merriam Webster's online dictionary ([www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/antinomy](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/antinomy)).
- 17 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1910 (1911), Vol. II.
- 18 One key work in this tradition is Paul K. Feyerabend's *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*, London: Verso, 1975 [1993]. Feyerabend is building a more general argument suggesting that anarchism ought to replace rationalism in the theory of knowledge.
- 19 It must cause no surprise that the basic functions of definitions also usually go unnoticed: (a) the establishment of boundaries; (b) sorting out the membership of the *denotatum*; and (c) deciding cut-off points vis-à-vis marginal entities. The classic on these issues is Giovanni Sartori "Guidelines for Concept Analysis" in Giovanni Sartori (ed.), *Social Science Concepts: A Systematic Analysis*, Beverly Hills/London/New Delhi: Sage, 1984, pp. 15–85 [in Greek: «Εννοιολογική ανάλυση: κατευθυντήριες γραμμές», in S. I. Seferiades (ed.), *Σημσιολογία, έννοιες, συγκριτική μέθοδος*, Athens: Papazisi, 2004, pp. 227–334].
- 20 Giovanni Sartori, "Comparing and Miscomparing", *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 3:3 (1991): 247 [in Greek: «Συγκρίνοντας: έγκυρα και εσφαλμένα», in Seferiades (ed.) *Σημσιολογία, έννοιες, συγκριτική μέθοδος*, pp. 179–199].
- 21 Charles Tilly, *Social Movements, 1768–2004*, Boulder/London: Paradigm, 2004 [in Greek: *Κοινωνικά κινήματα, 1768–2004*, Athens: Savvalas, 2007].
- 22 Marco Giugni, Doug McAdam, Charles Tilly (eds), *How Social Movements Matter*, Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- 23 See, especially, Ronald Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution: Changing Values and Political Styles among Western Publics*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977. Expressive collective action, however, is far broader than post-material demands. Whilst the latter may still be approached as instrumental action (albeit towards non-material ends), the latter purportedly reflects an altogether different *forma mentis*. As the late Alberto Melucci (*Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996, p. 359) famously argued, contemporary social movements are characterised by the fact that their "action is carried . . . at the level *not of real efficacy but of symbolic efficacy*" (emphasis added). See also his *The Playing Self: Person and meaning in the Planetary Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.
- 24 Edward P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, London: Merlin, 1978.
- 25 McAdam et al., *Dynamics of Contention*, pp. 46–7.