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STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Gregory M. Maney, Rachel V. Kutz-Flamenbaum,
Deana A. Rohlinger, and Jeff Goodwin, editors

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Three Mechanisms by Which Culture Shapes Movement Strategy: Repertoires, Institutional Norms, and Metonymy

Francesca Polletta

The problem for those who want to theorize the role of culture in strategy is this: how do you get at how culture limits movements' strategic options without representing activists as stupid, mystified, blind, or somehow limited in their ability to see strategic imperatives and opportunities that analysts can see? After all, if activists' beliefs are jeopardizing their success, why not just change those beliefs? This is not to say that activists aren't sometimes stupid, they aren't sometimes missing vital pieces of information, and they aren't susceptible to urban myths and sacred cows. That all goes without saying—for activists, just as the rest of us. The challenge, I believe, is to get at cultural constraints that operate no matter how smart and savvy activists are. Those constraints can be overcome, just as a deficit of funding or the demobilizing efforts of a repressive regime can be overcome. Often they are not overcome, however, with predictable consequences.

I suggest three analytical strategies for getting at how culture sets the terms of strategic action. *Collective action repertoires* are understandings shared by activists and authorities in a particular historical period about what strategies, tactics, and organizational forms are appropriate and effective. By tracing the rise and eclipse of particular repertoires, we can account for why strategies that seem obvious now simply were not obvious at other times. *Institutional norms of cultural expression* shape how activists make claims in diverse contexts—in court, to the media, in the legislature, and so on. Investigating those norms can help us to understand why activists are sometimes compelled to frame their message in ways that end up alienating potential participants or otherwise undermining their efforts. *Metonymy* is a figure of

speech in which one word or image is invoked for another. Studying the emergence and operation of metonymies in activist groups' tactical discussions can shed light on the processes by which a tactical common sense is created—one that both opens up and forecloses options.

There are other ways to capture culture's constraining role. I choose to focus on repertoires, institutional norms, and the trope of metonymy because each one captures something that is easy to miss about how culture operates. Together, they help us to understand not only the formation of movement strategy, but also how culture operates inside and outside movements.

First, let me say what is wrong with how we tend to think about culture and strategy. When I say "we," I do not mean all of us all the time, but I think we are all guilty of it some of the time. We tend to see culture and strategy as opposed. Cultural commitments lead people to behave in ways that are consistent with their values. Strategic ones lead people to behave in ways that are instrumental in furthering their goals. A cultural commitment demands that you treat everyone as equals. A strategic one demands that you let the people who know better make the decisions. Culture dictates that if you are nonviolent, then you do not cut fences to enter and occupy a nuclear power plant site; strategy may dictate that you do. Activists juggle strategic commitments and cultural ones, sometimes favoring one, sometimes the other, and sometimes they are stymied by their inability to do simultaneously what is right and what is effective.

The problem with thinking about strategy this way is that it misses, first, the fact that culture can be strategic. This is not only in the sense that culture can be used strategically, à la theories of collective action framing, but also in the sense that cultural commitments can have instrumental benefits. For instance, a firm commitment to egalitarianism may, under certain conditions, serve to unify the group. A preference for a kind of cool, affectless rationality may legitimize the group in the eyes of some audiences (Einwohner 2002).

Seeing strategy and culture as opposed also misses the fact that what counts as strategic is cultural. Let me illustrate. In his sophisticated ethnographic account of the demise of the antinuclear Clamshell Alliance in the early 1980s, Gary Downey (1986) describes a split between people in the group he calls egalitarians, who were committed to strict consensus, and people he calls instrumentalists, who were willing to relax the requirement of strict consensus in the interests of political efficacy. The two sides clashed in a debate about whether to illegally occupy the Seabrook nuclear plant. According to Downey (1986, 370), some members "implicitly emphasized

egalitarianism [at the expense of instrumentalism] . . . by arguing that a plant occupation was not successful if it did not produce a 'grassroots movement.'"

Why was galvanizing local activism seen as the expression of an egalitarian commitment rather than an instrumental one? In fact, Downey, tells us, initially it was not seen that way. The conflict between instrumentalists focused on stopping the construction of the Seabrook nuclear power plant, and egalitarians committed first to eradicating domination within their own ranks developed over time. Labeling the competing commitments as "instrumental" and "egalitarian" makes it difficult to see why galvanizing a local movement was considered at odds with an instrumental commitment. More important, the formulation obscures the shift through which the practices associated with an egalitarian commitment came to be seen as at odds with an instrumental one.

But here is the tricky part. We could just describe that shift, tracing activists' changing perceptions of what was strategic or ideological, what was a risk, and what was an opportunity. We could just describe how activists construct the rational. We want to do more, though. We want to explain why activists construct what is rational the way they do, and why those constructions change. We want to know why spurring grassroots mobilization was originally seen as strategic and came to be seen, by both sides in the debate, as ideological. Or why, to draw an example from my own work, consensus-based decision making, which in the early 1960s was seen as a practical organizing strategy, is now often seen as an ideological self-indulgence (Polletta 2006).

To better account for, rather than to simply describe, the role of culture in activists' strategic decision making, we need to pay fuller attention to the institutionalized *sources* of the understandings that shape activists' strategic decision making and to the observable *mechanisms* by which some options are ruled out and some ruled in. I say *institutionalized* sources because the culture that we use most is the culture that is familiar, that is part of the way we do things, conduct relationships, talk about politics, express emotions, and so on. The culture that matters is not free-floating, but rather anchored in familiar relationships, rules, and routines. I say *observable* mechanisms by which options are ruled in and ruled out to draw our attention to discursive and organizational processes instead of simply locating those mechanisms inside actors' heads.

Those are broad injunctions. Let me turn now to three analytical strategies, or more precisely, three loci of cultural constraint. Again, I focus on these three—repertoires, institutional norms, and the trope of metonymy—because they allow me to make three points about how we should study culture

and strategic action, both in movements and more generally. The first is that we should resist thinking of culture as operating only at the level of micro-interaction. This is why repertoires are useful. The second is that we should resist thinking about culture only in terms of texts, rather than also rule-governed performances. This is where institutional norms are relevant. The third is that we should resist thinking about meaning as achieved through consistency and clarity. This is where metonymy is relevant.

Repertoires

In any given historical period, challengers are likely to make use of a limited range of strategies, tactics, and claims. As Charles Tilly (1999, 419) puts it,

existing repertoires incorporate collectively-learned shared understandings concerning what forms of claim-making are possible, desirable, risky, expensive, or probable, as well as what consequences different possible forms of claim-making are likely to produce. They greatly constrain the contentious claims political actors make on each other and on agents of the state.

Repertoires are those shared understandings. Tilly insists that a repertoire is not a fixed menu of options. Rather, he emphasizes the extent to which claims that are considered realistic, appropriate, and effectual are developed through the interaction of challengers and authorities. Still, the fact that we can identify coherent sets of claims-making routines, which differ across historical periods—and which do not include other, hypothetically possible, routines—is evidence of cultural constraint.

What stands behind those repertoires? Why does one repertoire dominate rather than another? Tilly's (1998) answer, in the case of the emergence of a modern repertoire of protest in the nineteenth century, is that the state's relationship to its subjects changed. When the state's war-making projects required that it extract substantial resources from its subjects, it became a target, in turn, for subjects' demands. Protest became increasingly national, modular, and centered on electoral politics. Food riots and local skirmishes over taxation yielded to strikes and demonstrations in which people massed at formal seats of governmental power with banners and signs indicating their identity and interests. The electoral rally replaced the feast day procession, the formal meeting the chairvari.

In Tilly's account, the national state played a critical role in establishing the repertoire of contention that subsequently bound both the state and protesters. In Michael Young's (2006) account of a later repertoire, in antebellum America, the state played virtually no role. More than 150 years before the

so-called lifestyle politics of the new social movements, temperance reformers and abolitionists were encouraging citizens to publicly swear off the products of industries connected with the slave trade and to give emotional testimonials about the evils of drink at the same time as they fought to outlaw slavery and alcohol. Young attributes the rise of this "confessional mode of protest," a repertoire that fused bids for self- and social transformation, to the intersecting drives of two sets of religious institutions. In the 1830s, mainstream Protestant churches were creating a vast network of benevolent societies aimed at eradicating national sins like Sabbath breaking and drinking. Upstart Methodist sects were popularizing a revivalist style that focused on public confession. Reformers drew on these schemas of special sins and public confession to produce the first social movements in the United States with truly national scope.

The development of protest forms, strategies, targets, and issues associated with the rise of new digital technologies may be another new repertoire in the making. In this view, the Internet has made it easier to do the traditional tasks of mobilization, such as recruiting participants, staging demonstrations, communicating with the authorities, and so on. It has also changed what protest looks like in more fundamental ways (Bimber, Flanagin, and Strohl 2005; Earl and Kimport 2008; Shirky 2008; Yang 2009). The network logic of the Internet has become a model of and a model for transnational protest, Jeffrey Juris (2008) argues. An Internet-based logic is reflected in activists' preference for autonomy and diversity over unified fronts, horizontal coordination over centralized control, and temporary coalition over permanent organization. New digital technologies have not only helped activists to bridge the gap between radically democratic aspirations and the tactical demands of mobilization, but they have produced also political ideals in their own right.

Each of these accounts draws attention to the emergence of a distinctive way of protesting—to historically new claims, strategies, organizational forms, and targets. They attribute the emergence of new repertoires to diverse historical developments—in Tilly's account, to the centralization of the nation-state, and with it the need for citizens' allegiance; in Young's account, to the institutional needs of two major religious denominations; in the diverse accounts of the rise of Internet mobilization, to the spread of new communications technologies.

Repertoires pattern mobilization; they constrain activists' strategic and tactical options. Just how they do that is not yet clear. Tilly's answer was that activists are always innovating, always pushing at the boundaries of given

repertoires. The boundaries kick in where authorities declare performances illegal or otherwise impermissible. At a time of rapidly changing political opportunity, those holding power are likely to enforce rigid repertoires, and challengers to develop more flexible ones (Tilly 2006). This is probably right, but there is also undoubtedly more to activists' assessment of where the line between acceptable and unacceptable lies. For one thing, activists' ability to predict authorities' response likely varies. Douglas Bevington (2009) shows that the major environmental organizations were unwilling to engage in controversial litigation in the 1980s because they feared losing influence with congressional policy makers whom they lobbied on environmental policy. However, when outsider biodiversity groups pursued such litigation and won, it proved not to be at the cost of favorable congressional actions. In other words, the major groups' proximity to policy makers may have led them to misjudge the risks of challenge.

Activists' understandings of what is appropriate are also likely shaped in relation to groups other than authorities—other activists, for example. One can imagine that in the new environment of horizontally networked transnational protest that Juris describes, top-down, centralized organizations have a rough time recruiting young people, even though such organizations may be more effective and, in some cases, more democratic, than determinedly horizontal ones (Polletta 2002). In short, we need a better understanding of how activists themselves produce the line between the inside and the outside of a prevailing repertoire (see, for an example of such an understanding, Connell and Voss 1990). We also need a better understanding of how repertoires change over time (e.g. Clemens 1996; Steinberg 1999). When are repertoires innovations incremental, and when are they more radical? Finally, in addition to repertoires of claims-making strategies, we should pay attention to how appropriate emotional motivations for protest spread, producing, again, not just one episode of protest or even one movement, but potentially a variety of them (Haskell 1985a, 1985b).

Although some of these questions require more microlevel analysis of how activists appraise tactical options, one of the virtues of the concept of repertoire is that it encourages macrolevel analysis. The emphasis is less on a single movement or movement organization's decision making than on how logics of collective action spread across issues, groups, and regions. The concept of repertoires encourages us to pay attention to diverse movements operating at the same time (Haskell 1985a, 1985b; Young 2006), to relations over time between movements and authorities (Tilly 2006), and to the logics or schemas underpinning geographically dispersed episodes of claims making (Wood 2007; Juris 2008).

Institutional Norms

A second analytical strategy for getting at cultural constraint focuses not on texts but on performances, and more specifically, on the norms of cultural performance. The argument here is that culture constrains not by limiting what people can think but by limiting what they can say. Institutional conventions of cultural expression and evaluation shape the claims one can easily make. Institutional conventions are the rules for interacting within a particular setting such as a court, a college seminar, or a scientific lab meeting. Some conventions are formalized; others are not. For example, a judge can tell a story in court; a defendant may be penalized for doing so. A plaintiff in small claims court may be encouraged to tell a personal story and then penalized nonetheless because her story does not demonstrate the clear lines of cause and effect that judges, even small claims court judges, expect (Conley and O'Barr 1990).

Routines of news reporting, courtroom interaction, fund-raising appeals, and talk show performance encourage activists to present some complaints and not others; to invoke certain kinds of justifications; to display certain emotions; and to present certain people as spokespersons. In her study of activism by adult survivors of child abuse, Nancy Whittier (2001) found that when survivors gathered in movement conferences and at marches, speakers told stories of personal fortitude. They described fear and self-loathing yielding to grief, anger, and finally to the strength that came from casting off shame. With titles like "Sing Loud, Sing Proud," and "Courageous—Always Courageous," movement magazine articles and workshops encouraged participants to emphasize their recovery rather than the details of their abuse. When survivors appeared in court, however, they were encouraged to focus on the fear, grief, shame, and hurt produced by their abuse. These kinds of emotional performances were required, Whittier writes, to prove that the survivor was a victim deserving of compensation. Advice articles in movement magazines warned those going to court that the experience would be demeaning. They should be prepared to tell their stories in the ways expected of them and should avoid betraying their anger or pride, but should also find outlets outside court in which to tell other parts of their story. On television talk shows, another place in which child abuse activists appeared frequently in the 1980s, survivors focused more on the abuse and its traumatizing effects than on the survivor's eventual recovery. Accompanied by therapists, guests often cried while clutching stuffed animals or speaking in childlike voices. Whittier argues that by eliciting pity and horror in audiences, survivors' stance on talk shows may have made it more difficult for audiences to identify

with them. By representing themselves as passive and powerless (an image reinforced by the presence of therapists), survivors may have repelled others suffering from abuse who might have been mobilized by expressions of focused anger and stories of personal overcoming.

Certainly, one can refuse the conventions of cultural performance. Survivors could have been angry on talk shows and prideful in courtroom hearings. But doing so would have been risky. Culture shapes strategy in the sense that abiding by the rules of cultural expression yields more calculable consequences than challenging them. For example, feminists who brought workplace discrimination suits in the 1980s were encouraged to put women on the stand who could testify to their experience of aspiring to a higher-paying but traditionally masculine job and not getting it. This was despite the fact that individual stories could not demonstrate *patterns* of disparate treatment. Feminists could have refused to frame their claims in terms of individuals' experiences of discrimination. However, when they did, they were much more likely to lose their cases (Schultz 1990). Judges sometimes berated them for just that. A judge in the famous Sears case said the plaintiffs might have won if they had produced "even a handful of witnesses to testify that Sears had frustrated their childhood dreams of becoming commission sellers" (Schultz 1990, 1809).

What was wrong with having individual women testify to their experiences of discrimination? It was not only that activists had to sign onto a strategy that was fundamentally illogical. By arguing that women had the same aspirations as men, aspirations that were frustrated by sexist managers, plaintiffs also left unchallenged the idea that aspirations are only shaped in childhood rather than shaped in the labor market and by how a job is advertised. Why would a woman think herself eligible for a job that was presented as a man's job? That was the question that plaintiffs should have been able to ask, but were not.

It is hardly surprising, moreover, that conventions of cultural expression enter into activists' own tactical calculations. The animal rights activists whom Julian Groves (2001) studied discouraged women from serving in leadership positions because they believed that women were seen by the public as prone to emotionalism. That would cost the movement credibility. Activists spent little time debating whether women were in fact prone to emotionalism, however, or whether emotional accounts were more or less effective than rational arguments. Their calculations were strategic, but they were based on gendered assumptions about reason and emotion. The anti-gulf war activists observed by Stephen Hart (2001) relied on a pragmatic, nuts-and-bolts style in their internal discussions. Discussions of participants' personal commitments

or broad ideological visions were effectively ruled out of order. However, this constrained discursive style served them less effectively than did the expansive discourse characteristic of faith-based organizing groups, in which participants' ethical commitments were threaded through all discussions. Ironically, a discourse valued for its pragmatism proved less effective than one valued for its moral depth.

Are activists dumb if they don't recognize that discussions of faith and principle build commitment to the cause? That nuts-and-bolts tactical discussions are boring? That emotional appeals can be effective? They are not dumb; however, they are in some ways averse to risk. Activists have a stake in hewing to convention where it serves them and challenging it where it does not serve them. Aside from the fact that the conventional can easily seem natural, the conventional also yields predictable results. Challenging the norms of cultural expression, however necessary to securing real change, is a gamble.

Metonymy

Although I shifted in the last section from talking about cultural constraints operating out there in institutional norms to talking about how activists conceptualized those constraints in their internal discussions, I want to move now to an even more microinteractional level at which culture operates: in conversation. Observable conversational mechanisms operate to advantage some tactical options over others. In the absence of those mechanisms, we can assume, additional options would be available. Let me talk about metonymy, one such mechanism.

Metonymy is common figure of speech whereby one word or image is invoked for another. So we might refer to a decision made by "the crown" rather than the king, or describe journalists as "the press." Often, the object used in a metonymic relation denotes a whole cluster of objects. So when we say, "Washington is wary of recent Palestinian moves," we do not have a single person or organization in mind but rather a cluster of organizations that together represent Washington—State Department and national security officials, congressional representatives, the president, perhaps the pundits who comment on national affairs. Metonymy is similar to metaphor in involving the substitution of one thing for another. The difference, according to standard literary theory, is that in metonymy, the relationship between the two things is conventional, already known. Kings wear robes, but we don't refer to a decision handed down by "the robe." The use of metonymy indicates that the relationship between the two objects—the one referred to and the one or ones denoted—has taken on the status of common sense.

What makes metonymy useful for students of movements is that its use in movement groups' tactical decision making sheds light on how cultural associations shape strategy (Polletta 2006). We know that movement groups adopt targets, tactics, and strategies not only because they have a good likelihood of being effective and because they are consistent with the group's express ideological commitments, but also, often, because they are symbolically associated with people or things that are attractive for other reasons, or are symbolically opposed to people or things that are unattractive for other reasons.

Sometimes groups are explicit about the role of symbolic association. For example, feminists are often self-conscious in their rejection of bureaucratic organizational forms on account of the masculinist associations of such forms. However, many times the symbolic associations that shape strategic choice operate more implicitly. The emergence of metonymic structures in activists' discussions should alert us to the fact that such associations have become commonsensical. For example, when union officials in the 1960s farm workers' movement considered the possibility of launching boycotts and marches, they rejected such tactics as "not the union way" (Ganz 2000). "Union way" stood metonymically for a variety of things: political secularism; an unwillingness to engage in moral and emotional appeals; most importantly, an approach that was not that of the civil rights movement or a religious campaign. However, the effect of that metonymic association was to refuse tactics that could have energized the labor movement.

Of course, such associations can be challenged, and sometimes they are. Doing so is risky, though. As a kind of shorthand, metonymies both assume the existence of a group for whom the shorthand makes sense, and they signal membership in the group. That makes them difficult to challenge because to do so can be interpreted as a sign of one's ignorance and possibly one's insecure place in the group. It is always possible to think outside canonical narratives and the tropes on which they rest. To articulate those alternatives is risky, whether in a congressional hearing or in a group of like-minded activists.

As another example, in the early years of the militant Southern civil rights group, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), making decisions by consensus and rotating leadership was seen as a practical organizing tool, a way to train people for political leadership (Polletta 2006). It was also seen as a distinctively Southern black strategy, in contrast to the parliamentary style characteristic of Northern white activist groups. Its Southern black associations were part of its appeal to Northern white New Leftists. Between 1964 and 1965, however, consensus-based, nonhierarchical

decision making—participatory democracy—came to be seen as impractical, ideological, and self-indulgent. This was neither because SNCC's instrumental needs changed nor because its formal ideological commitments changed—two explanations that have been commonly offered. In SNCC workers' discussions during this period, participatory democracy increasingly came to be metonymically associated with the group's programmatic morass and with the dominance in the organization of Northern whites. I say metonymically associated because no one actually said how a more centralized organization would generate programmatic ideas. In fact, one could make a plausible case that a decentralized and nonhierarchical structure promoted the individual initiative that had been the source of SNCC's best ideas. Rather, at a time when the group was both desperate for effective direction and increasingly uncomfortable with the group's white membership, organizational structure stood in for these thorny problems. People did occasionally challenge the association of participatory democracy with programmatic paralysis on the one hand and the domination of whites on the other. They tended to be responded to in one of two ways, however. Either their challenges were ignored and discussion simply moved on, or challengers were seen as defending whites, whether themselves or other whites.

Metonymies can operate benignly, of course. However, they often have the effect of limiting the array of options worth considering. For SNCC workers, and, I argue, for activists long after, participatory democracy came to be seen as principled rather than pragmatic, aimed at personal self-liberation rather than political change, and white rather than black. The explicitly political benefits of the form were lost.

In a similar way, the alternative health care workers whom Sherry Kleinman (1996) studied insisted that meetings of their collective should be recorded in careful minutes, even though no one actually ever used or referred to the minutes, because doing so was a sign that they were a serious organization. As a result, they ended up spending a great deal of energy demonstrating that they were like the mainstream organizations they explicitly disavowed. When anticorporate globalization activists today dismiss twinning (wiggling one's fingers in agreement with a speaker) and vibe watchers in consensus decision making as Californian—that is, as apolitical and unconcerned with effective change—they foreclose the question of whether such techniques might in fact speed up decision making. In sum, tracing the establishment of metonymic structures in tactical debates can help us to understand how a tactical common sense is created and how it then shuts down possibilities as well as opening them up.

Conclusion

How do we get at the role of culture in shaping strategic possibilities with-
 out representing activists as strategic dopes or ideological dupes? Assume
 that, like the rest of us, activists are rational, creative, and practical. But, also
 like the rest of us, they are, among other things, more comfortable with the
 familiar than the unfamiliar, attuned to the norms of the institutional set-
 tings in which they operate, and fearful of seeming out of the loop in front
 of people they respect. The virtue of each of the concepts I have outlined is
 that they alert us to the institutionalized sources of the culture that shapes
 strategy and to the mechanisms by which it does so—*repertoires* by demon-
 strating broad historical variation in the use of strategies; *institutional norms*
 by drawing attention to the trade-offs that activists face in challenging con-
 vention; and *metonymy* by showing how cultural associations and oppositions
 are turned into common sense.

These are not the only ways that culture shapes strategic action—in addi-
 tion, that is, to activists' formal principled commitments. We can talk instead
 about tastes in tactics (Jasper 1997); about logics of appropriateness (Clemens
 1996); about linguistic tropes such as enthymemes (Feldman and Skoldberg
 2002); about social epistemologies of emotions (Polletta 2001). Some of these
 concepts overlap with the ones I have been describing; they operate variously
 at macro-, meso-, and microlevels; and they, too, have the virtue of direct-
 ing attention to the observable mechanisms by which culture limits not what
 people can aspire to, but what they can easily say.

This does not mean that challenges to mainstream culture always, willy-
 nilly, reproduce the status quo. Rather, for activists, the punch line is that
 important targets for movement work may be easily missed. Here is one:
 rather than only trying to challenge meaning, activists should challenge the
 social organization of meaning—the standards that define what counts as
 authoritative meaning. In his study of activism around AIDS, Steven Epstein
 (1996) shows that activists succeeded in gaining formal representation on
 federal research review committees. Just as important, they also gained recog-
 nition for AIDS patients' personal accounts of their illnesses as authoritative
 knowledge in drug research. Refusing the conventional antinomies of sub-
 jective and objective knowledge, reason and emotion, and science and folk-
 lore, they sought and won legitimacy for personal experience as a form of
 authoritative knowledge. In a similar vein, activists might work to gain author-
 ity for storytelling in contexts where statistics are called for and to gain
 authority for statistics where storytelling is expected.

The other target for movement work—and this is less banal than it

seems—is the metonymies that structure activists' own tactical common
 sense. All groups engage in shorthand, and group shorthands are as much
 about signaling membership as expediting tasks. The challenge is to ensure
 that such shorthands do not have the effect of trading scrutiny for unity,
 challenge for being in the know.

The message for people who study activism is that paying attention to
 culture does not mean trading explanation for description. It does not mean
 focusing only on microinteraction at the expense of the large forces and
 structures that people confront. It does not mean treating people simply as
 vehicles of cultural tropes that are beyond their control. Rather, it sheds
 light on important dynamics both of innovation and constraint—dynamics
 that operate outside movements as well as in them.

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