Culture and Movements

FRANCESCA POLLETTA and BETH GHARRITY GARDNER

Abstract

Scholars have paid increasing attention to the role of culture in social movements' emergence, trajectories, and impacts. Culture is no longer conceptualized as a subjective lens through which people perceive objective structures, but rather as a key dimension of those structures. This has allowed researchers to shed new light on why certain areas of social life come to be contested when they do, as well as to understand the limitations on activists' ability to act strategically, and the sometimes surprising ways in which movements have influence. We focus on one vein of research: the role of *institutional schemas* in spurring mobilization and accounting for its effects. Schemas are accepted ways of doing things—doing business, obstetrics, race relations, or Internet protest. Research has investigated both the conditions in which institutionalized schemas become vulnerable to challenge and whether winning the acceptance of a new institutional schema counts as movement success.

Why do social movements emerge when they do? What makes movements successful, variously, in recruiting members, securing support, and surviving organizationally? Moreover, when are social movements able to win the changes they seek—changes in legislation, policy, and the norms of everyday life? These questions have long animated the study of social movements. The analysis of cultural processes in movements has provided new and compelling answers to them.

OLD AND NEW APPROACHES TO CULTURE

Until fairly recently, answers to questions about movements' emergence, internal dynamics, and outcomes were mainly structuralist. For example, to account for why movements emerged when they did, scholars assumed that grievances were ubiquitous. Groups were able to act on their grievances when political shifts created new opportunities for protest to have an impact and when groups' indigenous structures were strong enough to mobilize people for collective action. Similarly, in accounting for internal movement dynamics, scholars focused on structural conditions. Features

of the political regime in which movement groups operated accounted for whether groups chose more or less assertive strategies. Competition over resources accounted for seemingly ideological antagonisms between movement organizations. Finally, in accounting for movement consequences, scholars focused on the determinants of legislative and policy change (for representative treatments, see McAdam, 1982; McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001).

Architects of the so-called political process model of mobilization were not indifferent to culture. To the contrary, they argued that cultural processes such as "framing" were key to groups' ability to perceive and act on political opportunities. With respect to movements' choice of tactics, scholars noted that activists struggled to balance strategic concerns with ideological ones, that is, struggled to stay true to their principles at the same time as they operated effectively. Moreover, when it came to movement consequences, political process scholars acknowledged that some of the most lasting changes wrought by social movements were in the realm of everyday life, outside the political sphere (for a political process approach to culture, see McAdam, 1994; Morris & Mueller, 1992).

However, culture was still given a fairly limited role in these accounts (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008; Polletta, 2008). Culture was treated as the subjective lens through which people discovered their interests, not as constituting those interests in the first place. It was treated as a brake on strategic choices, not as defining just what counted as strategic. Moreover, it was treated as a sphere of social life outside politics, not as a dimension of politics. The limitations of these conceptions became clear as scholars began to wrestle with questions that had not been answered (or even asked) by political process theorists. Not, why did aggrieved groups gain new opportunities for protest, but instead, why did diverse and dispersed individuals develop stakes in protest in the first place? Why did certain areas of social life—race relations, say, or nuclear policy, or university curricula—become the grounds for mobilization? Not, which of the strategies, targets, and tactics available to activists proved the most effective, but instead, why were only certain options perceived as available? And not, when did movements win concessions from the state, but instead, what counted as success when movements targeted institutions other than the state; corporations, for example, or the Catholic Church, or higher education (Polletta, 1999; Snow, 2004)?

Over the past 10 years, scholars have turned to an array of cultural concepts and theories to answer such questions. The best accounts, as we see it, have preserved a valuable tension between a culture-as-constitutive approach and one that seeks to show when and why and how cultural factors matter relative to more familiar structural and strategic ones. Such accounts have treated culture as powerfully shaping interests and identities, but also as circulating

through networks, backed up by resources, more legitimate when promoted by powerful actors, and employed in the service of organizational agendas.

ONE CULTURAL APPROACH: INSTITUTIONAL SCHEMAS IN MOBILIZATION

We want to highlight one strand of research and theorizing about culture. Scholars have investigated the role of institutional schemas, scripts, and discourses in spurring mobilization and accounting for its effects. We do not want to overemphasize the unity of the diverse perspectives we treat. Some perspectives draw intellectual inspiration from Michel Foucault while others are more indebted to William Sewell's (1992) notion of culture-structures, Charles Tilly's (1999) concept of repertoires of contention, or organizational theoretical perspectives on institutional stability and change (Friedland & Alford, 1991). What these perspectives share, however, is a view of culture less as people's worldviews, goals, and values (although those are certainly cultural too) than as their ideas about how the organizations and institutions in which they participate do and should work. The focus is on the *how* of interaction, on the appropriate means rather than the desired ends. The perspectives we describe probe the models, schemas, recipes, or rules of thumb that people rely on to do science, for example, or obstetrics or race or Internet protest (Clemens & Cook, 1999). Of course, there is a normative element to these schemas. How we do science is how we think it *should* be done. But the emphasis here is on the cultural norms that are embedded in everyday practices, norms that define what is appropriate in an often taken-for-granted way.

Schemas range from micro levels of action and interaction (how to show surprise, for instance) to macro ones (how to do capitalism), but the research we cite here focuses on *institutional* schemas. If we define an institution as a set of routinized practices around a culturally defined purpose (Jepperson, 1991), then institutional schemas are the models or logics that underpin those practices. Such models are detectable in diverse organizational materials: in conference proceedings and management guides, evaluation systems and regulations, meeting transcripts and public debates (Schneiberg & Clemens, 2006).

For social movement scholars, an approach focused on institutional schemas has several analytical virtues. Most obviously, it provides tools for studying movements that are not targeted to the state. Rather than making protest dependent on political opportunities (or on some nonstate parallel to political opportunities), this approach treats protest as emerging when institutionally appropriate ways of doing things lose their force. Old schemas may have become obsolete, or competing ones may have emerged; schemas

previously seen as congruent may no longer be seen that way; or people may use the schemas from one institution to measure the performance of another institution. Each of these developments may generate new lines of conflict, new stakes in contention, and, crucially, new collective actors.

In addition, a perspective focused on institutional schemas provides analytical purchase on the dynamics of innovation and constraint that characterize people's use of culture. On the one hand, institutional schemas define an instrumental common sense, that is, they define what is feasible as well as what is appropriate. On the other hand, people can and do combine, transpose, and adapt institutional schemas, in ways that open up new instrumental possibilities.

In the following sections, we highlight several studies that have focused on institutional schemas in order to account for movements' emergence, dynamics of tactical choice within movements, and movements' impacts.

MOVEMENT EMERGENCE

An approach centered on institutional schemas provides tools for studying the "prehistory" of movements, before an organized group alert to political opportunities even exists. One example comes from abortion activism in the United States. As Kristin Luker (1984) shows, institutionalized practices of legal abortion in the early 1960s were governed by two very different but rarely discussed moral schemas. In a "strict constructionist" schema, the fetus was a full person, albeit unborn, and its abortion was justified only when its survival jeopardized the life of the mother. In a "broad constructionist" schema the fetus was a *potential* person, and appropriately aborted if indications were strong that it would be abnormal. As medical advances made abortions to save the life of the mother an increasing rarity, the potential for conflict between the two perspectives increased. That conflict broke out into the open in 1962 when the story was publicized of a woman who planned to terminate her pregnancy after discovering that her fetus was likely to be deformed. Doctors adhering to a broad constructionist model worried about not having legal protection for the therapeutic abortions they were performing routinely. They suddenly found themselves with stakes in a movement for abortion reform, and they played a key role in forming one.

In his history of the homophile movement, John D'Emilio (1983) points out that same-sex sex has always existed and, indeed, has often been severely punished. But it was only in the mid-twentieth century that it became not just a deviant, immoral, illegal *act* but a deviant *identity*. A homosexual was a person whose acts, feelings, personal traits, even body type were sharply distinguishable from those of "normal" heterosexuals. That shift was propelled in part by a psychiatric model of homosexuality that gained currency

during and after WWII. It made possible both heightened repression (one could now be fired or prosecuted as a homosexual whether or not one had engaged in sex), and the creation of a homosexual collective actor.

In her study of the breast cancer movement, Maren Klawiter (2008) similarly accounts for the creation of a new collective actor: women at risk of breast cancer. The massive movement against breast cancer that emerged in the 1980s could not have emerged when only women with breast cancer saw themselves as victims of breast cancer. But changes in the medical diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer—in what Klawiter calls a "regime of practice"—dramatically expanded the population of women seen as at risk of breast cancer: asymptomatic women, women with precancerous conditions, women who had been treated for cancer in the past. Breast cancer shifted from an either/or condition to a continuum. The effect of that shift was to create new subjectivities (the woman "at risk"), new networks of sociality and solidarity (support groups), and a new sense of responsibility to other women similarly at risk. This was the context in which breast cancer activism burgeoned.

Luker, D'Emilio, and Klawiter seek to explain not why the state became vulnerable to challenge by already-constituted groups but why certain issues, practices, and identities came to be contested in the first place. Each study points to the interaction of structural trends and cultural schemas. Doctors' stake in abortion reform makes sense only in the context of broad changes in the organization and practice of medicine *and* in the context of competing understandings of the ontological status of the fetus. Psychiatrists' promotion of a view of homosexuality as a deviant identity would not have led to the development of a homosexual collective actor had it not intersected with long-term processes of urbanization and industrialization that made possible the development of an autonomous personal life. Had the new regime of breast cancer diagnosis not been accompanied by the creation of myriad support groups, a grassroots movement would have been unlikely. But each of these studies shows how disentangling the cultural dimensions of institutional practices from their structural ones can shed light on their interplay. This, in turn, makes it possible to predict the kinds of cleavages around which contention is likely to develop.

INTERNAL MOVEMENT DYNAMICS

Rather than treating activists' ideological commitments simply as a brake on their ability to make decisions strategically, a perspective highlighting institutional schemas focuses on how culture defines what counts as strategic. The central idea is that there are continuities between how people organize

themselves, choose tactics, and identify targets outside the movement and how they do so inside the movement.

There are certainly strategic advantages to adapting familiar forms to new purposes. For example, women activists in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century drew on familiar associational forms such as the club, parlor meeting, and charitable society to become a major force for social reform. As Elisabeth Clemens (1997) explains, these forms were seen as appropriate for women but as nonpolitical. William G. Roy (2010) found that civil rights activists used folk music much more effectively than did the Communist Party. The songs were often the same, but civil rights activists were able to capitalize on a schema of music-making that came from the black church: one in which performer and audience coproduced music. The result was that while Communist Party activists were never able to do more than entertain, civil right activists used folk music to mobilize. Familiar forms carried with them behavioral expectations that served movements well.

Yet familiarity also comes with dangers. In tracing experiments in radical democracy in seven movements over the past 100 years, Francesca Polletta (2002) found that activists tended to model their deliberations variously on the relations between religious fellows, teachers and learners, or friends. While each relationship supplied the mutual trust and respect that made it possible for activists to deliberate with a minimum of negotiation, each one also came with norms that, in predictable circumstances, made consensus impossible. For instance, friendship's tendency to exclusivity made it difficult for the 1960s activists to expand their groups beyond an original core. When they tried to implement mechanisms designed to equalize power, friendship's resistance to formalization produced organizational crises.

In addition to analyzing the effects of familiar nonpolitical schemas on activists' strategic choices, scholars in recent years have sought to account for the emergence of new schemas of protest. For example, Michael Young (2006) shows that in the 1830s, mainstream Protestant churches were creating a vast network of benevolent societies aimed at eradicating national sins such as Sabbath-breaking and drinking at the same time as upstart Methodist sects were popularizing a revivalist style that focused on public confession. Schemas of sin and confession joined to produce what Young calls a confessional mode of protest. Confessional protest fused bids for self- and social transformation. It animated national campaigns for temperance and abolition and against vice.

Almost two centuries later, scholars have asked whether the Internet is generating new logics of protest. Earl and Kimport (2011) argue that by reducing the costs of participation and the need for physical copresence, the Internet is not only making protest easier, but also altering familiar boundaries between

individual and collective action and between culture and politics. Increasingly, for example, the line between fan activism and what we might think of as more properly political protest has blurred. Jeffrey Juris (2008) maintains that the network logic of the Internet has become the basis for how global justice activists understand radical democracy. Activists' preference for autonomy and diversity over unified fronts, horizontal coordination over centralized control, and temporary coalition over permanent organization all reflect norms of Internet interaction (see also Polletta, Chen, Gardner, & Motes 2013 on how the norms of Internet interaction are reshaping the targets of protest).

A perspective focused on institutionalized schemas of protest does not deny that activists are strategic. Familiar ways of doing things and seeing things shape activists' strategic possibilities. This is not because alternatives are unthinkable but because the risks of nonconformity are substantial, whether in testimony before Congress or in a group of like-minded activists, and the rewards are uncertain.

MOVEMENT CONSEQUENCES

Studying movements' production of new schemas of action and categories of actors provides new purchase on the consequences of social movements that do not target the state, as well as movements that do target the state. The key here is to define success not only as new legislation or policy, but as changing the rules of the institutional game, whether that game is politics, science, Catholicism, or capitalism.

Changing the rules of the game can mean gaining legitimacy for new forms of knowledge. For example, in Steven Epstein's (1996) account, mobilization gained AIDS activists formal representation on AIDS research boards. More important, however, mobilization redefined disease victims' accounts of their illness as legitimate scientific knowledge. Success may also mean gaining legitimacy for new associational forms. Scholars have shown that movements have been responsible for the spread of organizational forms as diverse as mutual and cooperative enterprises (Schneiberg, 2007), bureaucratic thrift organizations (Haveman, Rao, & Paruchuri, 2007), and nonprofit recycling centers (Lounsbury, Ventresca, & Hirsch, 2003). In many cases, success has not been immediate. Rather, movements have promoted new organizational forms that were later exploited by more mainstream actors. For example, environmentalists' efforts to establish not-for-profit community-based recycling centers in the 1960s and 1970s laid the foundation for the for-profit recycling industry. As Michael Lounsbury and colleagues argue, had the movement-promoted volunteer activities of cleaning and sorting discards before pick-up not become common

practice, for-profit curbside recycling would not have gotten off the ground (Lounsbury *et al*., 2003).

Another important consequence of social movements is the creation of new actors, who, henceforth, must be accommodated in routine institutional processes. For example, Haragreeva Rao (1998) demonstrates that a movement of consumer leagues in the early twentieth century helped to create the consumer as a new political and economic actor. Mobilization around the Townsend Plan had the consequence of creating "the aged" as a new political category (Amenta, 2006). Gay and lesbian movements in the 1960s and 1970s created a diversified "gay" identity that could be unified to pursue interest group politics (Armstrong, 2002).

Movements may also legitimate new relationships among institutional actors. In the context of the anti-Vietnam war movement of the 1960s, Kelly Moore (2008) explains, scientists sought to reconcile their political and scientific commitments by creating public interest science organizations. The existence of such organizations, which provided scientific information to the public, simultaneously limited scientists' authority as neutral political actors and increased the authority of scientific knowledge in political debate. The movement thus changed the rules for how scientists could interact with politics and the public.

Just as a movement produced activist scientists who, in turn, crafted a new political role for scientists in American life, movements have helped generate activist shareholders who have influenced corporate positions on political and moral issues (Soule, 2009). Indeed, corporations may be especially responsive to protest on account of the emphasis they put on retaining stakeholder confidence and a positive public image (King & Soule, 2007). For example, research has shown that even when boycotts have been ineffective in reducing sales revenue, they have led to corporate concessions when media attention has jeopardized the company's image (King, 2008).

Finally, movements have produced logics of action and interaction that have become the basis for other movements. For example, as Joseph Davis (2005) recounts, the movement against child sexual abuse that emerged in the 1970s drew not only personnel from the anti-rape movement but also its account of sexual abuse. Before the anti-rape movement, therapeutic professionals viewed child sexual abuse through the lens of family systems and psychoanalytic therapies. Harm to the victim was not considered inevitable and was rarely thought to be long-lasting. Family members, and even the victim, were often seen as collusive with the abuser in tolerating the abuse. When anti-rape and child protection movements converged on the issue of child sexual abuse, however, the rape experience was transposed to the experience of sexually abused children. In the new schema, abuse was widespread but unrecognized, even by victims themselves; victimization

was clear-cut; and harm was profound and long-lasting. For breast cancer activists in the 1980s, the AIDS movement was the source not only of strategies and tactics but also a sense of what kinds of claims activists were entitled to make (Klawiter, 2008).

In sum, gaining the institutionalization of new schemas may produce new organizational forms, new political actors, new institutional relations, and new movements.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The perspectives we have described are diverse but they are joined by a focus on the sources of people's practical ideas about how to act and interact, whether in response to a breast cancer diagnosis or in a direct action movement organization or in a newly created consumer watchdog agency. These ideas are patterned and they matter in accounting for when movements emerge, how they unfold, and what consequences they have. Scholars using the approaches we have described do not deny that structures are obdurate, activists are strategic, and institutionalized policymaking is an important route to change. But they have shown that cultural processes can help to account for when obdurate structures become vulnerable to challenge, why shrewd and strategic activists nevertheless select from a limited menu of options, and why policy reform may not always be the most direct route to institutional change.

Questions remain in each of the areas we have described. With respect to movement emergence, the challenge for scholars now is to generalize beyond case studies to theorize more fully the conditions in which dominant institutional logics become vulnerable to challenge. We have described institutional schemas rendered either obsolete or incongruent by new forms of expert knowledge. One can also imagine schemas discredited by their association with newly unpopular actors or institutions. Moreover, one can imagine groups using the schema of one institution to challenge practices in another one; for example, using the standards of democracy to challenge the operation of economic institutions. We do not know, however, how typical any of these processes are. While scholarship on institutional schemas has valuably shown that concepts such as "political opportunities" do not always have parallels in non-state institutions, we should be wary of suggesting that the state is just one institution among many. More than most other institutions—science, say, or religion, or the family—the state influences the strategies, tactics, and organizational forms activists use and the impacts they have. The challenge, then, is to recognize the state's role in diverse institutions, while at the same time probing the ways in which distinctive institutional logics promote both stability and change.

With respect to movement groups' strategic decision making, future research should investigate how the limits of what is tactically feasible and appropriate are established, enforced, and revised. At the micro level, we need a better understanding of the social psychological and linguistic mechanisms by which tactical options get ruled in and out of consideration. Just how do institutional logics shape the tactical common sense of those who challenge the institution? We also need more research on the dynamics by which broad repertoires of contention change. Institutional theories of diffusion may be valuable here in capturing the dynamics by which a set of tactical options becomes common sense (Wood, 2012).

Scholars have shown that securing the acceptance of new cultural schemas is potentially an important outcome of protest. Key questions, though, have to do with when those cultural schemas are accepted, and just what counts as acceptance. With respect to the first question, do the same dynamics account for movement success across diverse institutions? As we noted, scholars have argued that corporations are often more responsive to activists than are states because of their concerns that activism might threaten their public image (Soule, 2009). Does the motivating power of reputational concerns vary across institutions? With respect to the second question, when is the adoption of a new schema more than superficial? Does the creation of consumer watchdog groups count as the acceptance of a consumer schema—or does it represent a more superficial response to the consumer movements' demands? Work on social movements converges here with scholarship on the cross-national diffusion of policy reforms on a Western polity model (Schofer & Hironaka, 2005). The question for both has to do both with the mechanisms of influence and with what counts as genuine influence.

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