CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN COMPARATIVE POLITICS

POWER IN MOVEMENT

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND CONTENTIOUS POLITICS

FOURTH EDITION

SIDNEY TARROW

Power in Movement

Social movements have an elusive power but one that is altogether real. From the French and American revolutions to the Arab Spring, and to ethnic and terrorist movements of today, contentious politics exercises a fleeting but powerful influence on politics, society, and international relations. Covering key episodes up to the attack on the US Capitol in January 2021, leading scholar of politics and government Sidney Tarrow uses a number of recent, historical, and comparative case studies to introduce his theory of social movements and political parties. The fourth edition of this classic study emphasizes the symbiotic relations between social movements and parties by focusing attention on the growing role of populism in Europe, Latin America, and the United States; analyzes the role of social media as a mobilizing and aggregating force for social movements; highlights the relations between structural changes in the economy and new forms of contention; and draws on new material on movements in the Global South and the relations between movements and democracy.

Sidney Tarrow is the Emeritus Maxwell M. Upson Professor of Government at Cornell University and Adjunct Professor at the Cornell Law School. Some of his recent publications include *Strangers at the Gates* (2012); *The Language of Contention* (2013); *War, States, and Contention* (2015); and *Movements and Parties: Critical Connections in American Political Development* (2021).

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Social Movements and Contentious Politics

SIDNEY TARROW
Cornell University

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For the world I hope my grandchildren –
Jamie, Gabriel, Owen, and Jonathan –
will live in

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Preface and Acknowledgments

When the third edition of *Power in Movement* appeared in 2011, it was in a period when the world seemed to be turning upside-down:

- In the United States, two new movements appeared on the horizon – the Occupy movement on the progressive left and the Tea Party on the socially conservative right.
- In the Middle East and North Africa, insurgencies erupted against autocratic regimes in what came to be called "The Arab Spring."
- In Europe, the 2007–8 financial crisis had led to a wave of anti-austerity movements, leading to the fall of governments in some countries and the rise of new parties in others.
- On the other side of the European spectrum, extreme right-wing movements gave birth to a range of "populist" parties, some of which rose to power.
- As the decade ended, the police murder of an African-American, George Floyd, led to a multiracial movement that spread around the world under the generic label "Black Lives Matter," and the "#Me-Too" movement lifted sexual harassment into a national and transnational preoccupation.

There were precedents for this wave of new movements, parties, and insurgencies. In the 1990s, protesters had begun to experiment with a new repertoire of contention, which combined peaceful and violent performances, face-to-face and long-distance mobilizations, and domestic and transnational actions. The new decade also brought a new technology of communication and mobilization – social media – which promised to empower and unite poorly resourced actors in large cross-sectional and transnational coalitions.

With some exaggeration, scholars quickly dubbed the movements of the decade "Twitter" and "Facebook" revolutions. Faced by this new social technology, state actors – particularly autocratic ones – were briefly at a loss for how to respond to the movements it had empowered. But if contentious actors could employ the tools of the Internet to mobilize followers, state actors

could combine the same tools with traditional weapons of repression to control challenges to their rule. Where the rise of transnational movements during the first decade of the new century had convinced many of a coming decline of state sovereignty, the second one showed that these tools could be employed by states to preserve their power.

Nothing illustrated the surge of the new militancy, its digital affordances, and their limitations better than what came to be called "The Arab Spring," which broke out in Tunisia in late 2010 and spread across North Africa and the Middle East. While Tunisia survived as a wobbly democracy, in Libya and Syria, insurgency descended into civil war, and in Egypt – the heart of the "Arab Spring" – the "Revolution" turned into its opposite, as the authoritarian regime reconstituted itself after a brief period of democratic elation.

Meanwhile, in the West and in Latin America, global support for neoliberalism began to wane. In Western Europe, a wave of anti-austerity movements challenged governments' responses to the global financial crisis. In East-Central Europe, where post-1989 governments had warmly embraced "the Washington consensus," right-wing populism spread and took over in Hungary and Poland. In Latin America, left-wing and indigenous-backed parties rose to power, first in Venezuela and then in Ecuador and Bolivia. These new movements built parties on the basis of domestic cleavages, but all of them framed their campaigns against global neoliberalism.

Scholars were not slow to respond to these upheavals. The social movement canon – which had been gradually constructed since the 1960s – began to give way to new ideas and to different perspectives. Some critics complained that scholars had focused too narrowly on western reformist movements; others were troubled by the fact that existing models left culture and emotion out of their accounts; still others observed that the field of social movement studies had come to elide social classes and other economic sources of contention.

Could these new efforts be blended with the more established tradition of social movement research? And could the latter encompass the violent forms of contention that had erupted in the global South? Some scholars – like two collaborators and myself (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001) – thought the study of social movements could profit from a deliberate integration with broader strands of scholarship. We also observed hybrid forms of contention arising out of the financial crisis, requiring scholars to move beyond their specialties to examine the relations between contentious and institutional politics.

No one addressed this argument more pithily than the late Roger Gould, who called for a broadening of the social movement canon to encompass the study of "contentious collective action." Under this umbrella, Gould called for including in the same framework studies of "contemporary social movements along with peasant jacqueries, bread riots and grain seizures, slave revolts, 'rough music,' eighteenth-and-nineteenth century democratic societies, urban uprisings,

artisanal blacklists and workshop turnouts, and revolutionary sects" (2005: 286). Had he lived into the second decade of the new century, he would have added "hactivism," digital network building, and – more generally – "connective action" (Bennett and Segerberg 2013).

When the third edition of this book appeared, it was too early to integrate many of the new developments and scholarly initiatives into a book that was already loaded with movements, protests, and campaigns. That edition did include a chapter on transnational contention, but it appeared too soon to take account of the role of the Internet as a vehicle for mobilization and of the "hybrid" forms of mobilization that were already appearing. And although I made efforts to extend its empirical range to the new movements beyond my comfort zone in Europe and the United States, it was too early to profit from the outpouring of research that followed the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, the anti-austerity movements in Europe, and the challenges to authoritarianism in China and elsewhere. The major thing that was missing was the role of movements in democratization and its reversal, a lacuna that I have tried to fill in a new Chapter 10 and which the events of the last few years have made more pressing.

This new edition attempts to fill these lacunae. It maintains almost the same structure as the last one, but it attempts to address the following four lacunae:

- First, it integrates material on the new forms of contention that have appeared in Asia, Latin America, and the United States over the last decade.
- Second, the chapter on transnational contention has been expanded to take advantage of excellent new work on contention beyond borders.
- Third, it explores the relations between movements and other forms of participation – especially political parties.
- Fourth, it includes two new chapters – the first on the role of movements in revolutions and the second on the role of movements in democratization and its reversals.

In revising this edition, I had the help of many people. It has profited immensely from advice and materials from Holger Albrecht, Eitan Alimi, Phil Ayoub, Chris Barrie, Mark Beissinger, Lance Bennett, Dina Bishara, Robert Braun, Louis-Philippe Brochu, Edmund Cheng, Donatella della Porta, Mona El Ghobashy, Cristina Flesher Fominaya, Jack Goldstone, Jennifer Hadden, Jai Kwan Jung, Neil Ketchley, Dongwook Kim, Steve Levitsky, John Markoff, Doug McAdam, David S. Meyer, Martín Portos, Celene Reynolds, Rachel Riedl, Dan Ritter, Kathryn Sikkink, Sid Milkis, Christian Rauh, Eric Selbin, and Jackie Smith. I owe a special thanks to Joshua Bloom, who was particularly encouraging when I was thinking of producing this revision, and to Karen Beckwith, who took time from a busy schedule to add her knowledge to important parts of this book.

I cannot fail to recognize four people in particular. My first and most enduring debt is to Susan Tarrow. For more years than she may care to

remember, she has awakened to the sound of computer keys clacking in the next room, a racket that followed her from New Haven and Ithaca to places as widespread as Elba, Florence, Oxford, twice to Paris, (a very wet) Quercy, Sydney, and Budapest. The computer is indifferent to her suffering, but I will be eternally grateful for her forbearance and her love.

The second is Lewis Bateman, who, for many years, was my editor at Cambridge University Press and became a trusted collaborator and friend. As long as he was shepherding the Comparative and Contentious Politics series for Cambridge, Lew combined broad knowledge of many disciplines with a shrewd instinct for what readers would be interested in and a puckish sense of humor drawn from many years of editorial experience. His patience and his support helped me to complete several books during an otherwise crowded period of my career.

The third and fourth are Doug McAdam and Charles Tilly, both of who inspired earlier editions of this book and much else besides. Chuck left us before he could have read every word I wrote with microscopic attention – as was his wont – but both their footprints are on every chapter. Models of the active, engaged scholarship I have striven to emulate, they contributed to whatever success this book may have had.

Introduction

The decade that began in 2010 initiated what was perhaps the most varied and rapidly spreading repertoire of conflict in living memory. Few governments fell, and almost no revolution succeeded but diffused through the new affordances of social media, social movements, and other forms of contention spread rapidly and millions of citizens became involved in them. I have chosen two "critical junctures"[1] – one at the beginning of the decade and the other at its end – to illustrate these trends. The first one erupted in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 2010–11, while the second swept across in the United States in the summer of 2020; the first was an almost revolution, and the other was a cycle of protest that influenced an election and much else besides. Between them they will introduce us to the forms, the preconditions, and the outcomes of the sequences of contentious politics and social movements that we will encounter in this book.

TWO CRITICAL JUNCTURES[2]

At the start of the decade, the MENA seemed to be in the grip of authoritarian regimes. True, youth unemployment had increased – always a sign of distress in the region. Strikes and protests had broken out (Bishara 2014), but this was common in Egypt (Beinen and Vairel 2013). Most of the countries in the region were governed by monarchies or by aging dictators. Only with hindsight can we say that the region was in the grip of what Charles Tilly called "a revolutionary situation," as I will argue in Chapter 10 (El-Ghobashy 2021; Tilly 1993).

I am grateful to Robert Braun for his incisive comments on a draft of this chapter, which helped me to both shorten and tighten it up.

[1] On "critical junctures," see Collier and Munck (2017 and 2022).

[2] I am grateful to Mona El-Ghobashy, Neil Ketchley, and Wendy Pearlman for their helpful corrections to a draft of this section.

But the MENA was not a unified region. In the West, Tunisia and Morocco had less than absolutist governments. In the East, Iran was ruled by a theocratic elite and Syria was in the hands of a family dictator, Bashar Al Assad, who had inherited his presidency from his father and who ruled the country with an equally iron fist. In the Gulf, oil-rich sheikdoms had evolved into varieties of absolutism: in the center of the region, Libya was ruled by an unhinged former military officer, Muammar Gaddafi; Egypt was in the grip of Hosni Mubarak, who had ruled his country for three decades with a combination of repression and welfare; and in Jordan, the King ruled alongside an elected parliament.

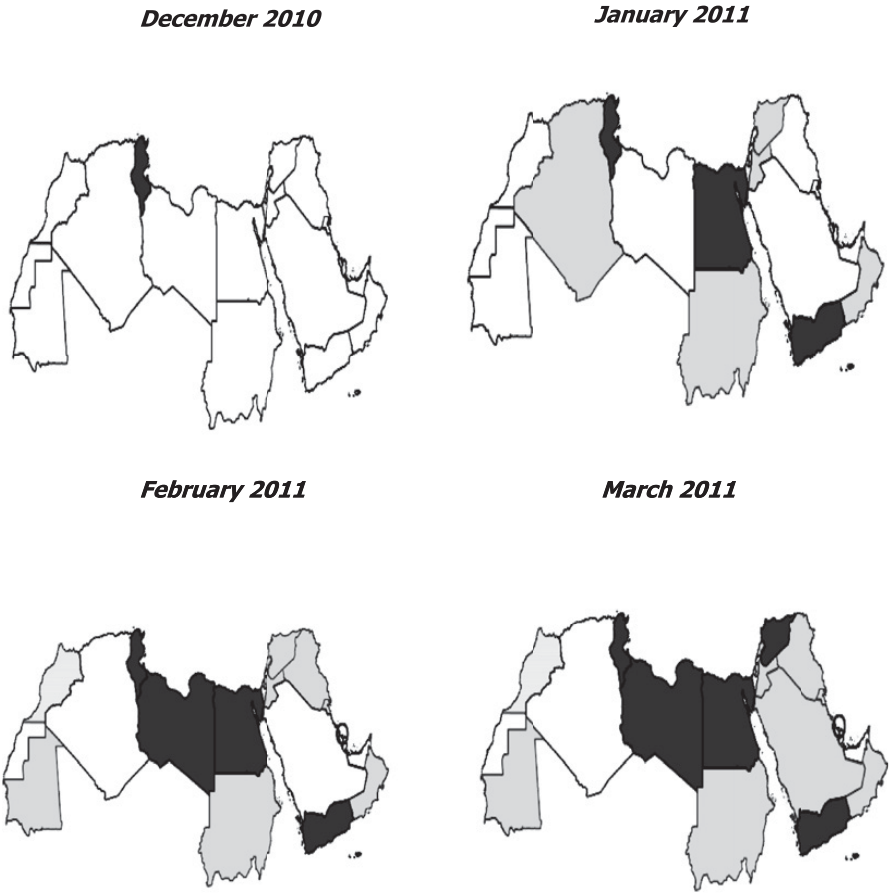
When the explosion came, it began in Tunisia, where a street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, had immolated himself in frustration at the corruption of the regime when he was slapped by a policeman and his cart was confiscated (Hmed 2012; see Chapter 9 of this book). His gesture rapidly triggered a national protest movement that forced President Ben Ali to flee and began a halting progress toward parliamentary democracy.

Perhaps because this opening salvo made it seem as if progress to reform would be easy, what came to be called "The Arab Spring" spread like wildfire. Throughout the region, workers laid down their tools, classrooms emptied into the streets, police stations were burned, and governments tottered. While unorganized youth gained the international spotlight, a variety of social, professional, and religious organized groups soon joined the movements for change (El-Ghobashy 2021: 15–16). Map I.1 illustrates the diffusion of the protest wave over the first three months after the self-immolation of Bouazizi in Tunisia.

By the end of the winter of 2011, the entire region was caught up in a paroxysm of revolt, inspired by slogans like "*Ash-sha'b yurīd isqāṭ an-niẓām*" ("The people want to bring down the regime!"), and spread by social media. The revolts led neighboring states like Israel and distant benefactors like the United States to worry about the stability of the region. Even President Barack Obama – who had famously come to Egypt soon after his inauguration to call for liberalization – worried that historical allies might fall into the hands of Islamist fanatics like those who had attacked his country on September 11, 2001. By the beginning of February, Obama's Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton, was urging Mubarak to institute reforms.[3]

The conflagration began with an apparently local incident – the self-immolation of Bouazizi – and led remarkably swiftly to the fall of Ben Ali. In the heady weeks that followed, as Mubarak was forced from power and a broad coalition came together on the streets of Cairo and other Egyptian cities (El-Ghobashy 2021; Ketchley 2017; Lynch 2013), it looked as if the most powerful country in the region would follow Tunisia's lead. Indeed, under the sponsorship of the SCAF (The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces),

[3] www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/21/barack-obama-arab-spring-cairo-speech.



MAP 1.1 Map of the major Arab Spring protests, December 2010–March 2011
Source: These maps were kindly constructed by Neil Ketchley

reasonably fair elections were held and a government led by the Moslem Brotherhood took power (Ketchley 2017: ch. 4).

As Egypt seemed to be moving toward democracy, other revolutionary sparks were quickly smothered. In the Gulf, there were no street protests in Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar and the movement in Bahrain was quickly snuffed out. In Libya, where the revolt was supported by an UN-backed intervention, Gaddafi was killed by insurgents and the country fragmented into competing armed militias. In Yemen, where dictator Abdullah Saleh resigned in a negotiated transition, a civil war broke out that continues till today. In the most tragic case – Syria – the Assad regime cracked down ruthlessly on dissenters, bombing and attacking entire neighborhoods and cities, in a violent civil war that killed over 500,000 Syrians and displaced

more than half the population, seven million of whom became external exiles (Mazur 2021; Pearlman 2018).[4] Even in Jordan, where the King could not even be criticized in public, local and regional protests escalated into a national uprising (Schwedler 2022: ch. 6).

A decade later, with the exception of Tunisia, most of the countries of the region were worse off than they had been before the outbreak of the revolts. In Egypt, which many observers had seen as a beacon for the rest of the region, widespread discontent with the Muslim Brotherhood government elected in 2012 led millions, supported by the army, to demand its removal. By 2013, the elected President Mohammed Morsi was under arrest.

The decade that ended in 2020 was less "revolutionary" than what had happened in 2011, but was just as contentious. In Myanmar (formerly Burma), a military coup that had thrown out a fairly elected government was contested by a youthful resistance movement, one that later hooked up with regional ethnic groups in what threatened to become a civil war.[5] In the West, a series of anti-lockdown protests contested governments' policies in combating the coronavirus pandemic while, in Brazil, protests broke out against the government's failure to contain the pandemic. But it was in the United States that 2020 produced the largest multiracial protest cycle in the nation's history.

The year 2020 was a terrible one for the nation's African-American community. Apart from the disproportionate impact of the coronavirus pandemic on people of color,[6] the brutal murder of a Black man by a white policeman on the streets of Minneapolis exposed the abiding racial cleavage in American society. Not long before, another African American named Ahmaud Arbery had been shot dead by two white men who pursued him in a van while he jogged through their neighborhood.[7] Not long after that, a young woman named Breonna Taylor was killed in her bedroom in Louisville, Kentucky by three police officers executing a "no-knock" warrant looking for drug dealers.[8]

But the culmination of this string of killings came on May 25, when George Floyd was arrested outside a store in Minneapolis, where he had been suspected of trying to pass off counterfeit money.[9] Caught on a cellphone camera with his

[4] The shattering figures on military and civilian deaths in the Syrian civil war can be found at www.statista.com/chart/19581/syrian-civil-war-fatalities-documented-by-syrian-observatory-for-human-rights/. Refugee totals by country of destination will be found at www.cfr.org/article/arab-spring-ten-years-whats-legacy-uprisings.

[5] www.nytimes.com/article/myanmar-news-protests-coup.html.

[6] For evidence of the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on minorities, go to https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33231496/.

[7] The murder was filmed by a third man who was later found to have been collaborating with the killers. www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/05/10/ahmaud-arbery-shooting-new-video-shows-georgia-jogger-did-nothing-illegal/3105123001/.

[8] www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/breonna-taylor-police-shooting-what-we-know-about-kentucky-woman-n1207841.

[9] www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52861726.

hands manacled, Floyd appeared to be complying with the arresting officers. But moments later, he was brought to the ground next to a police cruiser. When he complained that he couldn't breathe, the policeman, Derek Chauvin, told him to stop shouting. As passersby pleaded with Chauvin to release him, Floyd cried out for his mother before he died.

A video taken by a young bystander revealed the extent of the crime. Chauvin had kept his knee on Floyd's neck for almost nine minutes while three of his colleagues looked on. The officer was charged with third-degree murder, while the other officers were charged with lesser offenses. Chauvin was condemned by a judge the following May and was sentenced to 22.5 years in prison a month later.[10]

Floyd's murder led to a massive cycle of protest across the country that spread across the world. Less than two weeks after the killing, NBC News identified George Floyd protests in forty countries on every continent but Antarctica.[11] These protests were particularly vigorous in countries like the United Kingdom, which had substantial populations of color.[12]

But the most meaningful reactions to the murder of George Floyd came in the run-up to the US presidential election campaign. Polls taken over the weeks following his killing estimated that between 15 and 26 million Americans participated in demonstrations over the killing. According to the *New York Times*, on June 6 alone, half a million people came out to protest in nearly 550 different places.[13] "I've never seen self-reports of protest participation that high for a specific issue over such a short period," said Neal Caren, editor of the prestigious academic journal, *Mobilization* – more than the 3–5 million people who had turned out to protest against Donald Trump's inauguration four years earlier.[14]

Protests following police abuse had also occurred during the urban unrest of the 1960s. But in three respects, this new wave of protest was different:

First, the slogan of many of the protesters was institutional – the demand to "defund the police!"[15]

Second, in part because the 2020 presidential election was imminent, the protests transitioned quickly into institutional politics.

Third, and most important, outrage at Floyd's murder spread from African Americans to White and Hispanic communities and to small towns and cities around

[10] www.nytimes.com/2020/05/29/us/derek-chauvin-criminal-complaint.html.
[11] www.nbcnews.com/news/world/map-george-floyd-protests-countries-worldwide-n1228391.
[12] www.bbc.com/news/uk-52907101. [13] Buchanan et al. 2020.
[14] See Chenoweth and Pressman 2017.
[15] In a dozen cities, including Minneapolis, city councils voted reductions in police funding. These included some of America's biggest cities, including New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and San Francisco. The defunding bills included proposals to remove police as responders for "non-criminal" calls, homeless services, traffic enforcement, mental health emergencies, substance abuse, public transit, and other areas of social services. www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/15/defund-police-movement-us-victories-what-next?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other.

the country as well as to metropolitan areas. This was "a demographic mix that is far more varied than anything we have seen in recent years," wrote sociologist and civil rights expert Doug McAdam soon after.[16]

But as it has often been the case in American history, when African Americans make progress, a countermovement against the movement soon arises. On July 8, 2020, accompanied by his Attorney General, William Barr, President Donald Trump marched out of the White House to St. John's Episcopal Church, which had been damaged by fire in a previous protest, brandishing a Bible. Because there were still protesters on the streets, the president ordered security forces to clear the square in front of the White House, employing tear gas to do so. Trump's photo-op in front of the church came after he delivered remarks at the White House in which he declared himself "your president of law and order" and demanded that state governors deploy National Guard units to "dominate the streets."[17]

The governors were unwilling to respond to Trump's demand, but, affronted by the protests, by street paintings of "Black Lives Matter," and later by the pandemic lockdowns decreed by Democratic governors, groups of far-right activists attacked demonstrators all over the country in remarkably similar routines. In the course of the campaign, convoys of vehicles filled with armed rightwing activists began to thread through the streets of cities where there had been racial justice protests, waving their guns and occasionally shooting paintballs at protesters.[18]

As in many cycles of contention, the attention of the public focused on evidence that the country was going through a crisis. And so it was, heightened by the tragedy of the coronavirus pandemic, by the economy's attendant decline, and by the outgoing president's claim that he had been robbed of the presidency by an electoral steal. But beneath the radar, there were signs that the chaos and conflict of the summer and fall of 2020 were disguising quieter shifts that might lead to a galactic shift in American politics. This had been hinted at during the midterm elections of 2018, when the Democrats made major gains (Meyer and Tarrow 2018). But it culminated in Trump's defeat in the 2020 elections, when Democratic candidate Joe Biden beat the incumbent president by over seven million votes. Inspired by the George Floyd movement, young people turned out to vote in greater numbers than in 2016. But the biggest demographic story was the massive turnout of

[16] McAdam 2020.

[17] www.npr.org/2020/07/17/892277592/federal-officers-use-unmarked-vehicles-to-grab-protesters-in-portland.

[18] In many of these places, far-right activists adopted the tactic of ramming protesters with their vehicles. As of early July, over 100 Black Lives Matter protesters reported having been rammed while marching. www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/07/08/vehicle-ramming-attacks-66-us-since-may-27/5397700002/.

Black voters – and particularly of African-American women – to support the Democrats. George Floyd's murder was the incident that helped end the experiment in elective authoritarianism that had threatened to undermine American democracy since Trump's election in 2016, but it was only a spark in a longer and more deeply rooted critical juncture.

That juncture did not ease with the end of the election season. Like an increasing number of elected dictators in the Global South, in the wake of his election loss, the outgoing president insisted the election had been stolen from him and launched a series of legal and media challenges against the outcome. In state after state, Trump-employed lawyers fruitlessly challenged the official results and Trump supporters threatened election officials.[19] The campaign moved beyond the courts to attempts to convince public opinion that the election had been stolen. In February 2021, the Atlantic Council sponsored a search using a social media monitoring tool that detected over 8,200 online news articles containing keywords "Stop the Steal" or "#StopTheSteal" between September 1, 2020 and February 2, 2021. Those articles garnered more than 70,000,000 engagements on different platforms. The results of the social media search are reproduced in Figure I.1 from a *Just Security* report on February 12, 2021.

The results of this priming of his base from the outgoing president were not long in coming. On January 6, 2021, an invasion of the Capitol by groups of Trump supporters underscored both the danger to democracy and the revulsion of the majority of Americans – including most Republicans.[20] From a police murder to a mass protest movement to a countermovement, to a presidential election and an attempted insurrection, America in 2020–21 experienced the biggest domestic crisis since the outbreak of the Civil War over a century earlier. Like the Arab Spring, these events combined a cycle of social movements and contentious politics. Before turning to how this book will proceed, let us first define and characterize these terms.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN CONTENTIOUS POLITICS

Ordinary people do not often try to exert power by contentious means against national states or opponents. But in the last seventy years alone, the American Civil Rights movement, the peace, environmental and feminist movements, revolts against authoritarianism in both Europe and the Third World, and the rise of Islamist movements have brought masses of people into the streets demanding change. They often succeeded, but even when

[19] The most notorious threats came against Georgia's Republican Secretary of State, Brad Raffensberger, after he certified the results from Trump himself and from supporters who threatened Raffensberger's family. www.cbs46.com/news/report-ga-sec-of-state-raffenspergers-family-receiving-death-threats-over-2020-election/article_48ac0104-cabc-11eb-9618-6f559ef997f9.html.

[20] See Rachel Blum and Christopher Parker (2022).

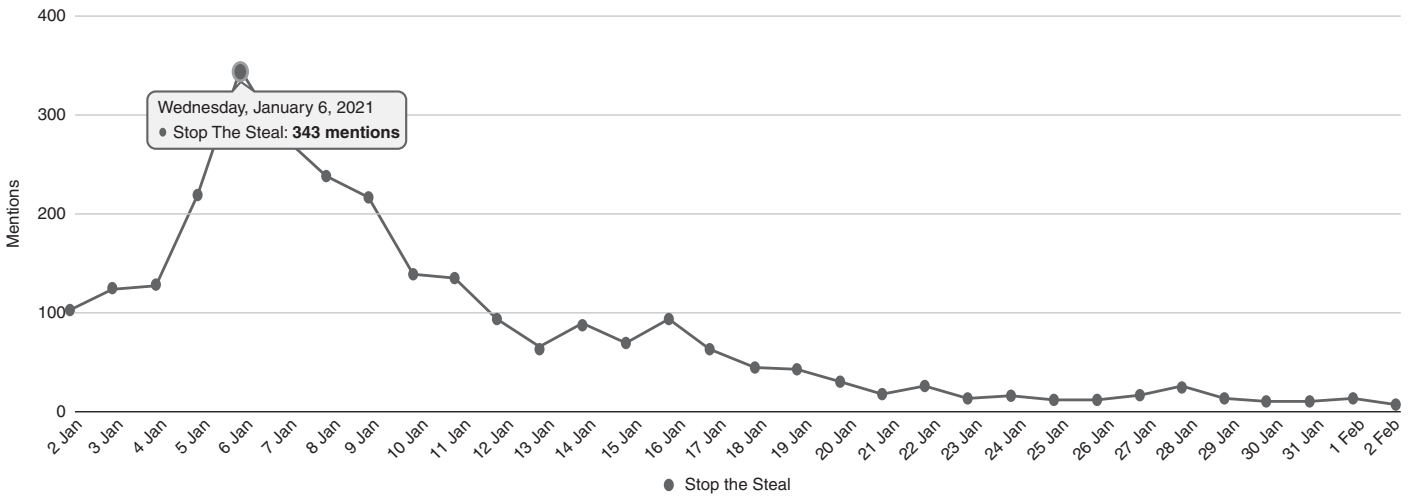


FIGURE 1.1 Web mentions of the "stop the steal" message, September 2020–February 2021
Source: Reproduced with the kind permission of the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab. www.justsecurity.org/74622/stopthesteal-timeline-of-social-media-and-extremist-activities-leading-to-1-6-insurrection/

they failed, their actions set in motion important political, cultural, and international changes.

Contentious politics occurs when ordinary people – often in alliance with more influential citizens and with changes in public mood – join forces in confrontation with elites, authorities and opponents. Such confrontations go back to the dawn of history. But mounting, coordinating, and sustaining them against powerful opponents is the unique contribution of the social movement – an invention of the modern age and an accompaniment of the rise of the modern state (see Chapter 1). Social movements are triggered when changing political opportunities and constraints create incentives to take action for actors who lack resources of their own. People contend through known repertoires of contention and expand them by creating innovations at their margins. When they are backed by well-structured social networks and galvanized by culturally resonant, action-oriented symbols, contentious politics leads to sustained interaction with opponents.

How ordinary people take advantage of incentives created by shifting opportunities and constraints; how they combine conventional and challenging repertoires of action; how they transform social networks and cultural frameworks into collective action – and with what outcomes; how these and other factors combine in major cycles of protest and sometimes in revolutions; how the internet and other forms of electronic communication are changing the nature of mobilization; and how the social movement is challenging democracy in the twenty-first century: these are the main themes of this book.

These themes take on special importance given the vast spread and growing diversity of contentious politics today. Just think of the variety of social movements since the 1960s: first civil rights and the student movement; ecology, feminism, and the peace movements; struggles for human rights in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian systems, and Islamic and Jewish religious extremism in the Middle East and Hindu militancy in India; anti-immigrant violence in Western Europe and Christian fundamentalism in the United States, ethnic nationalism in the Balkans and the former Soviet Union; suicide bombings in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Over the past five decades, a wave of new forms of contention has spread from one region of the world to another and among different social and political actors.

Not all these events warrant the term "*social movement*," a term I will reserve for *sequences of collective action based on underlying social networks, on resonant collective action frames, and on the capacity to sustain challenges against powerful opponents* (see Chapter 1). But all are a part of the broader universe of contentious politics, which emerges, on the one hand, from within institutional politics, and, on the other, draws on both structural roots and political opportunities. Placing the social movement and its particular dynamics within this universe of contentious politics is a central goal of this study.

In this book, I will not attempt to write a history of either movements or the broader field of contentious politics. Nor will I press a particular theoretical perspective on my readers or attack others. Instead, I will offer a broad theoretical framework buttressed by historical and empirical materials for understanding the place of social movements, cycles of contention, and revolutions within the more general category of contentious politics. This book takes up this challenge.

Contentious Collective Action

The irreducible act that lies at the base of all social movements, protests, rebellions, riots, strike waves, and revolutions is *contentious collective action*.

Collective action can take many forms – brief or sustained, institutionalized or disruptive, humdrum or dramatic. Most of it occurs routinely within institutions, on the part of constituted groups acting in the name of goals that would hardly raise an eyebrow. Collective action becomes contentious when it is used by people who lack regular access to representative institutions, who act in the name of new or unaccepted claims, and who behave in ways that fundamentally challenge others or authorities.

Contentious collective action is the basis of social movements, not because movements are always violent or extreme, but because it is the main and often the only recourse that most ordinary people possess against better-equipped opponents or powerful states. This does not mean that movements do nothing else but contend: they build organizations, elaborate ideologies, socialize and mobilize constituencies, and their members engage in self-development and the construction of collective identities. Moreover, some movements are largely apolitical, and focus on their internal lives or those of their members. But even such movements, as sociologist Craig Calhoun reminds us, encounter authorities in conflictual ways because it is these authorities who are responsible for law and order and for setting the norms for society (1994b: 21). Organizers exploit political opportunities, respond to threats, create collective identities, and bring people together in order to mobilize them against more powerful opponents.

Contentious forms of collective action are different than market relations, lobbying, or representative politics because they bring ordinary people into confrontation with opponents, elites, or authorities. This means that the particular historical, cultural, and power conditions of their society in part determine and in part are determined by contentious politics. Much of the history of movement/state interaction can be read as a duet of strategy and counterstrategy between movement activists and powerholders. Ordinary people have power because they challenge powerholders, produce solidarities, and draw on meanings with significance to particular population groups, situations, and national cultures.

This means that we will have to embed the general formulations of collective action theory within history with the insights of sociology, political science, and

anthropology. In particular, we will see that bringing people together in sustained interaction with opponents requires a *social* solution – aggregating people with different demands and identities and in different locations in concerted campaigns. This involves, first, mounting collective challenges; second, drawing on social networks, common purposes, and cultural frameworks; and third, building solidarity through connective structures and collective identities to sustain collective action. These are the basic properties of social movements.

THE BASIC PROPERTIES OF MOVEMENTS

With the emergence of the social movement in the eighteenth century, as I will show in Part I, early theorists focused on the three facets of movements that they feared the most: extremism, deprivation, and violence. Both the French Revolution and early nineteenth-century industrialism lent strength to this negative reaction. Led by sociologists like Emile Durkheim, nineteenth-century observers saw social movements as the result of anomie and social disorganization – an image well captured in the phrase "the madding crowd" (1964; see the review in McPhail 1991).

While the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the normalization of movement activism into social democratic and labor parties, the movements of the interwar period – in the form of Italian Fascism, German Nazism, and Soviet Stalinism – fit the image of violence and extremism fostered earlier by French and other scholars. With the exacerbation of ethnic and nationalist tensions after the fall of communism in 1989–92 and the terrorist outrages of the first decade of the twenty-first century, this negative view of social movements has been reinforced. We saw this view re-emerge in the anti-immigrant violence in Europe, which evoked the horrors of the interwar years. We see it again in the images of "wild-eyed radicals rampaging through the streets" during the George Floyd protests, most of whom were actually quite peaceful.

But these are extreme versions of more fundamental characteristics of social movements. Extremism is an exaggerated form of the dramatization of meaning that is found in all social movements – what I will call in Chapter 6 "movement framing"; deprivation is a particular form of the common purposes that all movements express; and violence is an exacerbation of collective challenges, often the product of public clashes with police, rather than the intention of activists. Rather than defining social movements as expressions of extremism, violence, and deprivation, they are better defined as *collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities.* This definition has four empirical properties: collective challenge, common purpose, social solidarity, and sustained interaction (for a similar definition, see Tilly and Wood 2008). Let us examine each of these briefly before turning to an outline of the book.

Collective Challenges

There are many forms of collective action – from voting and interest group affiliation to bingo tournaments and football matches. But these are not the forms of action most characteristic of social movements. Movements characteristically mount *contentious* challenges through disruptive direct action against elites, authorities, other groups, or cultural codes. Most often public in nature, disruption can also take the form of coordinated personal resistance or the collective affirmation of new values (Melucci 1996).

Contentious collective challenges are most often marked by interrupting, obstructing, or rendering uncertain the activities of others. But particularly in authoritarian systems, where overt protest is likely to be repressed, they can also take the form of slogans, forms of dress or music, graffiti, or re-naming familiar objects with new or different symbols. Even in democratic states, people identify with movements by words, forms of dress or address, and private behavior that signify their collective purpose, like the slogan "the 99" percent in the Occupy movement or "The people want to bring down the regime" in Egypt.

Contention is not limited to social movements, though contention is their most characteristic way of interacting with other actors. Interest groups sometimes engage in direct challenges, as do political parties, voluntary associations, and groups of ordinary citizens who have nothing in common but a temporary coincidence of claims against others (Borbáth and Hutter 2020; Burstein 1998). Nor are contentious challenges the only form of action we see in movements. Movements – especially organized ones – engage in a variety of actions ranging from providing "selective incentives" to members, building consensus among current or prospective supporters, lobbying and negotiating with authorities, and challenging cultural codes through new religious or personal practices (Tarrow 2021).

In recent decades, just as interest groups and others have increasingly engaged in contentious politics, movement leaders have become skilled at combining contention with participation in institutions. Think of the health care debate that roiled American politics in 2009–2010. Although it was dominated rhetorically by the debate in Congress and financially by well-heeled Washington lobbies, much of the public saw it through the lens of the so-called tea parties – in imitation of the Boston tea party that helped to touch off the American Revolution – and the "town meetings" at which well-orchestrated challenges were organized against members of Congress who supported reform.

Despite their growing expertise in lobbying, legal challenges, and public relations, the most characteristic actions of social movements continue to be contentious challenges. This is not because movement leaders are psychologically prone to violence but because they lack the stable resources – money, organization, access to the state – that interest groups and parties control. In appealing to new constituencies and asserting new claims, contention may be the only resource movements control. Movements use

collective challenge to become the focal points of supporters, gain the attention of opponents and create constituencies to represent common purposes.

Common Purposes

Many reasons have been proposed for why people affiliate with social movements, ranging from the desire of young people to flout authority all the way to the vicious instincts of the mob. While it is true that some movements are marked by a spirit of play and carnival while others reveal the grim frenzy of the mob, there is a more common – if more prosaic – reason why people band together in movements: to mount common claims against opponents, authorities, or elites. Not all such conflicts arise out of class interest, but common or overlapping interests and values are at the basis of their common actions.

Both the theory of "fun and games" and that of mob frenzy ignore the considerable risks and costs involved in acting collectively against well-armed authorities. The rebel slaves who challenged the Roman Empire risked certain death when they were defeated; the dissenters who launched the Protestant Reformation against the Catholic Church took similar risks. Nor could the African-American college students who sat-in at segregated lunch counters in the American South expect much fun at the hands of the thugs who awaited them with baseball bats and abuse. People do not risk their skin or sacrifice their time to engage in contentious politics unless they have good reason to do so. It takes a common purpose to spur people to run the risks and pay the costs of contentious politics.

Social Solidarity

The most common denominator of social movements is thus "interest," but interest is no more than a seemingly objective category imposed by the observer. It is participants' *recognition* of their common interests that translates the potential for a movement into action. By mobilizing consensus, movement entrepreneurs play an important role in stimulating such consensus (Klandermans 1988). But leaders can only create a social movement when they tap into and expand deep-rooted feelings of solidarity or identity. This is almost certainly why nationalism and ethnicity or religion have been more reliable bases of movement organization in the past than the categorical imperative of social class (Anderson 1990).

Is an isolated incident of contention – for instance, a riot or a mob – a social movement? Usually not, because participants in these forms of contention typically have no more than temporary solidarity and cannot sustain their challenges against opponents. But sometimes even riots reveal hints of a common purpose or solidarity. The urban riots all over America in the 1960s or in Los Angeles in 1992 were not movements in themselves, but the

fact that they were triggered by police abuse indicates that they arose out of a widespread sense of injustice. Mobs, riots, and spontaneous assemblies are more an indication that a movement is in the process of formation than movements themselves.

Sustaining Contention

Long before there were organized movements, there were many forms of contentious politics on the scene of history – from food riots and tax rebellions to religious wars and revolutions – as we will see in Part I. But it is only by sustaining collective action against antagonists that a contentious episode becomes a social movement, as we will see in Chapter 3. Common purposes, collective identities, and identifiable challenges help movements do this; but unless they can maintain their challenge, they will either evaporate into the kind of individualistic resentment that James Scott calls "resistance" (1985), harden into intellectual or religious sects, or defect from activism into isolation. Sustaining collective action in interaction with powerful opponents marks the social movement off from earlier forms of contention that preceded it in history and accompany it today.

Yet movements seldom fall under the control of a single leader or organization; how can they sustain collective challenges in the face of personal fear or egotism, social disorganization, and state repression? This is the dilemma that has animated collective action theorists and social movement scholars over the past few decades. My strongest argument will be that it is changes in public political opportunities and constraints that create the most important incentives for triggering new phases of contention. These actions in turn create new opportunities both for the original insurgents and for latecomers, and eventually for opponents and powerholders. The cycles of contention – and in rare cases, the revolutions – that ensue are based on the externalities that these actors enjoy and create. The outcomes of such waves of contention depend not on the justice of the cause or the persuasive power of any single movement, but on their breadth and on the reactions of elites and other groups.

I will turn to these political opportunities and constraints in Chapters 6 and 7. But here it is important to underscore what I do *not* mean by this. I do not claim that "objective" opportunities automatically trigger episodes of contentious politics or social movements regardless of what people think or feel. Individuals need to *perceive* political opportunities and to be *emotionally engaged by their claims* in order to be induced to participate in possibly risky and certainly costly collective actions; and they need to *perceive* constraints in order to hesitate to take such actions. This helps to explain the important role of movement entrepreneurs in launching efforts to diffuse contention: individuals and groups who seize opportunities, demonstrate their availability to others, and thereby trigger the cycles of contention that will be discussed in Chapter 8.

WHAT CAIRO AND MINNEAPOLIS CAN TELL US

Let us return to the contentious episodes at the beginning of this chapter to introduce what this effort *will* attempt to do.

First, though both episodes were recent, each one was embedded in history, and this is a lesson that all social movement scholars should learn. In the MENA region, the long history of collective action against structural inequalities and authoritarian governments, and in the United States, the heritage of the urban uprisings of the 1960s and the racially inflected patterns of policing in America's cities provided incentives and models for protesters. Chapter 1 will examine the structural and historical underpinnings of contentious politics while Chapter 2 will survey how social movements have been studied by a variety of scholars approaching the subject, first from a structural perspective (Marx and the Marxists), then a statist one (Tocqueville and Weber), then from the standpoint of modernization (Durkheim and the collective behavior theorists), and ending with how recent movement scholars have embedded movements in a broader panorama of contentious politics. In Chapter 3, I will sketch the modern practices of "acting collectively" and the changes in collective action in the internet age.

Second, the range of actors in the two stories went well beyond the traditional subjects of "social movements" – students, workers, professional movement organizers, and women's groups. In Egypt, doctors, lawyers, street vendors, women, and even soccer fans combined in the long occupation of Tahrir Square; in the United States, middle-class white Americans joined African Americans in the George Floyd protests, but were also found in the countermovement that they triggered. Chapter 4 will examine the combination of crowds, coalitions, and social movement organizations (SMOs) that we find in the broad range of movements we will encounter.

Third, movement activists often respond to short-term and highly personal grievances. But grievances do not add up to collective action unless they are framed by unifying slogans, symbols, and ideologies. Across the MENA region, activists were inspired by the same slogans, while the George Floyd movement was animated by the apparently obvious – symbol of "Black Lives Matter." Some of these meanings are inherited from the past, but one of the tasks of social movements is to "make meanings" – often in the process of interacting with authorities. Chapter 5 will outline how movements "frame" protests and shows how such frames emerge and help to shape their outcomes.

The two stories also tell us that movements – whether they are "political" or not – are best understood within political regimes, which determine the political structures in which they operate. Chapter 6 embeds movements in different types of political regime, from which the more limited concepts of political opportunity and threat are drawn.

One of the paradoxes of social movements is that, while they often seek major structural changes, their outcomes are, at best, reformist, and at worst, failures. There are a number of reasons for this, foremost among them the fact that elites usually command greater resources than insurgents. Chapter 7 will explore the paradox that reformism is more likely to be the result of movement episodes than the structural changes that many of them seek.

Once founded, movements describe different kinds of dynamics. Every critical juncture – and we will encounter many of them in this book – has antecedents, structural conditioning, high points, and legacies (Collier and Munck 2022). This means that movements are not made out of whole cloth, but develop through different phases – what I will call "cycles of contention." Some of these lead to positive outcomes for movement activists – as did the George Floyd protests in the election of the Biden administration – but others lead to disaster – as did the Arab Spring in most of the countries in the region. Chapter 8 will show how spirals of opportunity and threat guide movement episodes toward a variety of outcomes.

Movements are active in both democratic and authoritarian regimes but they have their most dramatic impact during periods of revolutionary upheaval. Chapter 9 surveys the rich literature on revolutionary cycles, attempting to trace the role of movements in both revolutionary situations and revolutionary outcomes.

The relationship between movements and democracy is one of the most fraught in modern history. Following the "third wave of democracy" in the 1980s, many observers saw successful democratization as the result of elite pacts. But both successful democratic cycles and democratic decline are most often driven by social movements, as we saw in both the Arab Spring and will see in the Trumpist movement. Chapter 10 will examine the preconditions for both successful democratic movements and for countermovements that attack democracy, drawing on evidence from Europe, Latin America, and the United States.

Both of the aforementioned episodes demonstrate the growing importance of transnational networking and mobilization, including mobilization through the internet. As we saw in Map I.1, the Arab Spring diffused rapidly both within and outside of national boundaries. But there are other forms of transnational movement politics too; Chapter 11 will survey five of these forms and speculate about whether the world is moving toward a "world of movements" or to a continuation of national politics as usual.

Finally, both episodes show how common what I will call "the social movement repertoire" has become. Some scholars have wondered whether the world is becoming "a social movement society." But that term first surfaced when it seemed that peaceful forms of contentious action were spreading among ordinary people. With the turn of the new century, the phrase "social movement society" has taken on new and more forbidding meaning. In the conclusions,

I will ask whether transgressive politics is beginning to overwhelm contained politics, and, if so, what are its implications for civil politics.

This book is not primarily concerned with methodology – or with its elder sibling ontology – but readers have a right to know what kind of methods will be employed. In the past few decades, as Chapter 2 will show, social movement scholars have employed a variety of approaches, ranging from structural approaches to cultural and psychological ones to efforts to place movements in their historical settings. While much of the evidence in this book will come from history, history itself is not a methodology; wherever possible, I will employ an approach I call "*relational realism*."

Relational approaches to social change first became prominent in sociology in the 1990s but "gradually spilled over into other social science disciplines, such as political science and communications studies, as well as sub-disciplines, such as conflict studies and political communication" (Alimi et al. 2015: 24). Relationalists like Mustafa Emirbayer called for scholars to "reject the notion that one can posit discrete, pre-given units such as the individual or society as ultimate starting points . . . . [I]ndividual persons . . . are inseparable from the transactional contexts within which they are embedded" (Emirbayer 1997: 267–289). Though concerned with structural realities, they do not conceive of actors as immovable objects but as fluid outcomes of relational networks and broader structures.

In the study of contentious politics, it was Charles Tilly who called for an approach he called "relational realism." Instead of individual dispositional mechanisms, which had come to dominate the rational choice persuasion, he emphasized the transactions among individuals and groups. This led him to adopt a "mechanisms" approach to social change. Tilly's teaching was adopted by two other scholars – Doug McAdam and this author – in a book with him that we called *Dynamics of Contention* (2001). This was followed by a group of scholars writing in the journal *Mobilization* (McAdam and Tarrow 2011), and by Alimi and his collaborators in their book *Dynamics of Radicalization* (2015).

About the same time, a focus on relational mechanisms appeared in political science in landmark work by Daniel Carpenter and Colin Moore on the birth of the women's movement in early to mid-nineteenth-century America. From their analysis of historical records, they deduced three relational mechanisms:

- *Persuasion:* "Canvassing required women to formulate and express arguments on behalf of the antislavery cause, to listen to objections and questions, and to exhibit patience with those who expressed doubts or who disagreed with the petition's prayer";
- *Network formation:* "Women who were canvassing petitions made contact with other women, many of whom were newly introduced to the possibility of women entering into the public sphere";

- *Organization:* "Coordinating the work of others, calculating signatures, getting the petition's prayer printed, planning the collection of signatures, and other activities required a new kind of organizational work" (Carpenter and Moore 2014: 481–482).

More recently, Robert Braun employed a relational approach in his study of why some religious groups provided protection to Jewish victims of persecution by the Nazis while others passively condoned or even supported such attacks (2019: 1). Braun began his quest for an answer by looking at "something inherent to any individual, group, or denomination itself," but he found little support for these factors. Instead, he found that "it is the interplay of church and community" that explained who risked their lives and fortunes to rescue Jews in the communities he studied. Minority clerics from either religious community – Catholic or Protestant – were able to set up and sustain underground movements, while those who came from overwhelmingly Catholic or Protestant communities did not (Braun 2019: 85–86). It was neither the structural properties of these communities nor a high level of individual volition that explained why these clerics stood out from their religious brethren; it was the relational mechanisms that connected some risk-taking religious communities to some Jewish populations that produced high-risk activism within "hubs of commitment."[21]

Mechanisms of Mobilization

The most basic mechanism in the study of social movements is *mobilization*. Without mobilization, there would be no collective action. Touching off the process, there are of course, *environmental mechanisms* that affect both challengers and authorities. These are the kinds of mechanisms – such as appropriation of a surplus and the accumulation of capital – that Marx had in mind with his macro-historical model of the factors that would lead to revolution (see Chapter 2). The political process begins when these mechanisms become manifest. They manifest in four main ways of interest to the process of mobilization:

- Both challengers and those they face engage in interpretation of what is happening – they frame the field of contention;
- Both challengers and those they face perceive opportunities and threats in these processes;

[21] In a personal message to the author, Braun puts it in a slightly more technical way: in a hostile environment created by the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, the interactions between mainstream society and minority religions created social isolation for these communities; the interaction between mainstream authorities and minority religions created attachment to pluralism; and these unleashed two dispositional mechanisms: clandestine capacity and empathy. For the elaboration of these mechanisms and their interaction, see Braun (2019).

- Both challengers and authorities create or appropriate resources, organizations, and institutions to take advantage of opportunities and ward off threats;
- Challengers engage in innovative collective action in order to attract supporters and impress or threaten authorities, while the latter organize to oppose or appease them.

The result is mobilization, followed by its repression, facilitation, or some combination of the two.

In reality, most episodes of contention are far more complex than this simple sketch would suggest. They involve challengers who do not always agree on either their aims or their methods; authorities who are often divided between those who favor repression and those who prefer to compromise; the media, which play an important role in framing the episode for a broader public; and bystanders and third parties. What is important is the essentially *relational* nature of contentious politics. We cannot predict the outcome of any episode of contention by focusing only on a single movement or movement family.

In this book, we will encounter a number of mechanisms of mobilization. Recall the two vignettes that introduced this chapter. Without naming them as mechanisms, in both Cairo and Minneapolis, we saw:

Resource mobilization: the organization of collective action and the creation of organizations and coalitions to sustain it;
Framing demands around widely held symbols and linguistic devices with the capacity to rally supporters and attract third parties;
Accessing and creating opportunities, a process that varies in different types of regime;
Diffusing collective action to new sites and different actors after a protest has been mounted, including the transnational diffusion of movements to which we will turn in Chapter 10.

Not all mobilization sees challengers waving flags, rallying followers in the streets, and openly challenging enemies or authorities. Think of the Dutch Catholic priests and the Protestant ministers who quietly put together Braun's "hubs of commitment" in order to rescue Jews from the Nazis. Of necessity, they operated quietly underground, drawing on the religious faith and the community solidarity of their parishioners, only becoming publicly visible when they were betrayed or their activities were exposed. Or think of the "helpers" who saved Allied fliers whose planes were shot down over France; they built on networks of family, friendship, and partisanship to transport downed fliers from where they fell from the sky to places of safety (Andrieu 2021). Though marchers waving flags are the most visible point-persons in social movements, mobilization is a broad-ranged set of mechanisms like the ones that Carpenter and Moore found among women in early American and

Braun unearthed from the historical records of the Holocaust in the Netherlands.

Mechanisms of Demobilization

Social movement scholars have developed to a high degree our knowledge of the mechanisms of mobilization; but they have been less successful in analyzing the processes of *demobilization* that inevitably follow. Note that I used the plural "*processes*" of demobilization because the evidence is that, once episodes of mobilization are triggered, so many other actors and institutions are activated that it is not possible to talk about a single process of demobilization. Turning to the mechanisms that we see in demobilization, we can isolate five important ones:

- *Repression*, or, more generally, controlling contention, but also, its opposite
- *Facilitation*, which satisfies at least some of the claims of contenders, who may also retreat from the struggle
- *Exhaustion*, the simple weariness of being in the streets, or, more subtly, irritation with the strains of collective life in a movement
- *Radicalization*, the shift of social movement organizations or parts of them, toward increased assertiveness, and
- *Institutionalization*, the incorporation of some other organizations or parts of them into the routines of organized politics.

We will return to the interaction of these last two apparently opposing – but often co-occurring – mechanisms in our examination of cycles of contention in Chapter 8.

In this book, we will encounter mechanisms of both mobilization and demobilization in a number of episodes of contention, but in different combinations. For now, it is important to point out that – just as mobilization does not always succeed – demobilization does not always produce failure. This is because demobilizing movements can lead both to hoped-for and unanticipated change: changes like the creation of a political party on the model of the movement, as we will see in the creation of the *Podemos* party which built on the *Indignados* movement in Spain in 2012(Flesher Fominaya 2020); changes like the passage of legislation granting some of the demands of a demobilized movement, as the French Government did after the failed May 1968 insurrection (see Chapter 7); and changes like the reform of a regime as it corrects for the excesses that led it to face challenges, as did the Jordanian monarchy after the Arab Spring (Schwedler 2022). In the course of this study, we will encounter a number of mechanisms, some of them environmental (such as population shift); others dispositional (like the identity shift we see in the launching of many new movements); and still others relational (like the interaction between protesters and police). Complex episodes of contention, like the cycles of contention we will examine in

Chapter 8 and the revolutions that we will encounter in Chapter 9, embody a mix of all three kinds of mechanisms. The challenge will be to transform the narrative stories of these episodes into what Tilly called "superior stories" (2002), that are built out of concatenations of mechanisms.

CONCLUSIONS

As we proceed through the chapters in this book, we will encounter many episodes of contention: the conflict between women's suffrage movement and its conservative opponents in the years surrounding World War I; the Italian extraparliamentary left and its rightwing enemies in the late 1960s and 1970s; and the conflict between the anti-Trump resistance and the Trumpian movement that held power in the United States between 2016 and 2020. In the media, these conflicts are often seen as disputes among elites and intellectuals who are infested with the virus of polarization and radicalization. But behind these elite and intellectual cleavages are social movements.

In order to understand the dynamics of these interactions, we need to go behind the "standard stories" in the headlines and construct "superior stories" based on the mechanisms that constitute them (Tilly 2002). The polarization of American politics today was constituted by a series of environmental, dispositional, and relational mechanisms. What particular mechanisms were in play is a matter for empirical research, but the important point is that contentious politics are neither driven by structural necessities nor embedded in individual minds, but are the result of the concatenation of social mechanisms.