

Passionate Politics

Emotions and Social Movements

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The University of Chicago Press
Chicago and London

The Business of Social Movements

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Many of the chapters in this volume concern the role of emotions in collective political behavior. The paradigm they take issue with is a highly rational one, in which social movement activity proceeds much as business activity proceeds. It is spearheaded by ideological entrepreneurs, competing in markets for the allegiance of potential participants. It is based on the calculated employment of well-defined organizing and oppositional strategies. It depends on the use of these strategies during particular windows of political opportunity.

These chapters challenge that vision of social movement activity. They sketch a different kind of social movement, driven by indignation, fear, hope, a sense of right and wrong. One might see the project as an effort to re-romanticize political activity, in that it recalls an era when social movements were self-consciously about ideology and right versus wrong—an era when the language of rational political calculation had not yet invaded either social movements or the social-science theories that described them.

These days, the prevailing social-science paradigm for understanding social movements emphasizes rational calculation among movement “entrepreneurs.” Many of the contributors to this volume explore, conversely, how passion matters. In this brief commentary I sketch the transformation of passionate action into calculative interest-driven action not merely within social movements but across social realms. My aim is not

to romanticize the past but to note a wider trend in which human action is increasingly framed as driven by interest and calculation, even in realms that were, not long ago, thought to operate on other principles.

Albert Hirschman, in *The Passions and the Interests* (1977), described how the process of modernization transformed the “passions” motivating social behavior into modern “interests” and thereby turned passionate behavior, rhetorically at least, into calculative behavior. The chapters in this volume can be seen as pushing Hirschman’s agenda forward, by suggesting that while “interest” is the new rhetoric of social movements (both in practice and in social theory), passions and emotions continue to be an alternative trope through which social movement actors make sense of their own behavior. Outward-looking descriptions of activity may have assumed the language of strategic management, but inward-looking descriptions still often assume the language of emotion and commitment.

My contention is simply that the ongoing substitution of interest for passion, in conceptions of human behavior, helped to generate the prevailing rationalist social-scientific paradigm. This change may also be leading social movements to depict themselves as oriented to rational calculation—as “managed” in the conventional sense, rather than as spontaneous, devotional, and charismatic. Until recently, theorists had described both social and religious movements as based on beliefs, ethics, and sentiment. Now, social and religious movements alike are seen as akin to business enterprises, and theorists describe individual behavior with metaphors borrowed from rational choice theory. Modern theories of political activity more generally depict the world in this way. This raises a question: Should we satisfy ourselves with constructing theories that mimic the rhetoric of actors themselves, or should we try to explain that rhetoric itself? Is it enough to develop a theory that treats social movement leaders as the strategic actors they describe themselves as?

The wider phenomenon that produces this dual change, in social movements and social-science theories describing those movements, is the rationalization and demystification of social life. The particular course that rationalization has taken in the West has been to exalt the individual and to envision all of her behavior from the vantage point of micro-economic theory. The rise of rational choice theory in political science is part and parcel of this process, for now modern political behavior is thought to be subject to narrow principles of calculation. Not only voting choices are calculated, but the color of candidates’ ties and the force with which they kiss their wives on television. What has happened to social movement theory and practice has happened everywhere, and certainly to political theory and practice.

The power of the universal rational-actor model is abundantly clear in the sociological field of organizational studies and in the various practical fields of administration. As recently as the 1960s, organizational theorists held that different administrative models were appropriate for different realms. They argued that soup kitchens should be managed differently from stock brokerages, because organizational goals and individual motives vary between realms. But in all domains of management theory these days, actors are first and foremost rational. Thus it was not so long ago that public administration was a separate field from hospital administration, which was distinct from educational administration, social service administration, etc. (e.g., Clark 1956; Scott and Meyer 1983). Some of these realms were closer to one another than others, but there were broad differences across realms. Theories of administration were taught in distinct professional schools, each with its own ethic. Each was based in a distinct theoretical tradition and in a distinct empirical core of cases or studies, precisely because organizational goals, and the motives of workers in those organizations, were thought to differ radically. But this world has changed. Hospitals, social service agencies, and now social movement organizations hire MBAs who craft incentive and reward systems, career ladders and evaluation systems, based in the presumption that everyone is a rational actor. That no one acts out of passion.

The economics-based model of organizing diffused from business corporations to every imaginable realm of social activity (Meyer 1994). Churches and little leagues now buy into the notion that there are universal laws governing social behavior that demand a universal set of organizing principles. The distinct philosophies of management found in different sectors a generation ago have given way to a common model, based in micro-economic theory. What elicits the right behavior on Wall Street will work, as well, at Unicef. All sorts of organizations:

- Adopt strategic plans.
- Use internal labor markets to create long-term incentives.
- Write mission statements.
- Depict themselves as entrepreneurial.
- Appoint CEOs and presidents and human resources management vice presidents.
- Consider mergers to achieve economies of scale and spinoffs to help them focus on their core mission.

Management is management. Organizational goals, and the motives of members, no longer matter. Managing a social movement is no differ-

ent from managing a bank because we are all in it, whatever it is, to pursue self-interest. Thus the models of how to organize collective endeavors—whether automobile plants, stock brokerages, or environmental movements—have converged on a single set of precepts, based loosely in economic theory. One obvious consequence of this shift is that people in all walks of life pay increasing attention to issues of remuneration, for our incentive-based, individualistic, rationalized management systems signal to us that this is what we should care about. “Show me the money” is the mantra everywhere. An unintended consequence of the economists’ effort to incentivize work is a growing disparity in income—as doctors and HMO managers and United Way directors and even professors come under this system, those at the top of their professions get “incentivized” off the charts (Frank and Cook 1996). The incentives have become a legitimate reason for being and doing—everywhere and not only in executive suites.

Even entire organizations that were founded to proselytize or to do good works can legitimately abandon their missions if it seems rational to do so. The YMCA abandons religious evangelizing when the market for it dwindles, and runs health clubs (Zald and Denton 1963). Community colleges give up on bringing college education to the masses and instead offer French cooking and remedial math (Clark 1956).

Rather than pondering this trend, most social scientists have taken it at face value. They increasingly treat people as self-interested, rational, and calculating. Theories of social services management, educational management, and indeed social movements themselves are increasingly rationalized. They reduce human motivation to the single dimension of rational calculation, for that is how the actors themselves describe their own motives. I don’t mean to evoke a romantic past in which people, and theories about them, were driven by passion for life, altruism, and brotherly love. Most sociological theories have described actors as driven not by passion but by something much more mundane, namely habit and routine. Rather than romanticize the past, I simply mean to suggest that we might think of this shift itself as a sociological outcome to be explored.

This trend has so fully taken over social movement theory that management theorists are beginning to borrow back. When they look to social movement theory, lo and behold, they find precisely the same kinds of rational-actor models found in strategic management theory. In some cases, those models have been extended by social movement theorists, and their innovations have been embraced by management theory (Swaminathan and Wade 1999).

Social scientists cannot really be faulted for this. Theorists of mo-

dernity typically take actors at their word. To the extent that social movement activists frame their own behavior in terms of strategy, calculation, and prevailing principles of management (windows of opportunity, issue entrepreneurialism), it comes as no surprise that theorists use the same kinds of language. But of course, the language of rational calculation is, in social movements as in corporations, a lens through which actors see their own actions, retrospectively and prospectively. When you do what you do, you invent stories to tell that are highly rationalized. The president of Exxon does, but so does the president of Greenpeace. This is the point of the organizational theorist Karl Weick (1993), when he talks about the process as “sense-making”—the post hoc construction of meaning for behavior. In the organizational cases Weick comes into contact with, as in modern social movements, the accounts actors construct are calculative, rational, and strategic. Sense-making occurs within given cognitive frames, and actors construct rationales for their behavior based on the choice of frames. One can frame any single action in a multiplicity of ways. A demonstration against the abuse of laboratory animals can be framed in terms of the natural rights of those animals and in terms of the opportunity to build a coalition and expand membership in a social movement organization. Movement activists now supplement, or even supplant, the former sort of “sense-making” with the latter.

In *The Passions and the Interests* Hirschman did not argue that in the modern world only rational calculation exists. He argued that in the modern world interest and rational calculation are how people understand behavior. Where prevailing political/rational theories in the field of social movements fall short is that they are insufficiently skeptical about actors' own accounts. When anthropologists observe totemic societies in which local lore has it that frog spirits rule the universe, they do not conclude that frogs are inscribed in plows and circumcision mats because frogs indeed rule this domain. They conclude that the locals have developed a system of meaning that locates authority over social practices in the frog totem. Likewise, when we study modern social practices, we must do what we can to step outside of the frame of reference of the locals. We must try to see rationality as a system of meaning that locates authority in a set of universal social and economic laws—laws that have the same status as the frog totem.

What is perhaps regrettable about the expansion of the interest frame is that we all make sense of our own behavior through this lens, and it is, after all, the lens of the “dismal” science of economics. Would that we could choose the frame we use, for we might well choose to see our lives in terms of the pursuit of salvation or the liberation of house

cats. Indeed, what is distinctly irrational about the rational choice model that we all now must live by is the very choice of this dismal model of action. Would we freely choose to orient our lives to the accumulation of German luxury sedans, however splendid, when we could substitute the glory of eternal salvation?

Because managers have been at the game of behaving rationally for quite a while, students of management developed cultural accounts of managerial rationality long ago. Weber emphasized the importance of *verstehen* in sociology, or grasping the actor's own understanding of his actions. On Weber's shoulders stand most of the constructionist theorists of organizations, from John Meyer (Meyer and Rowan 1977) and W. Richard Scott (1995) to Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell (1991), as well as many of the network theorists, from Harrison White (1992) to Mark Granovetter (1985). They see rationality as a frame of action, which shapes action (to be sure) but which also shapes the accounts people give of their own action. In Weick's terms, rationality provides the framework within which sense-making happens. Anthropologists have long been in the business of parsing the meaning of human behavior, and they come to similar conclusions when they observe modern, rational, settings. Mary Douglas (1986) underscores this by noting that rationalized social systems carry very different logics of rationality that shape individual action. She thereby refutes the notion that individuals behave in ways that are rational in an absolute sense. Clifford Geertz (1983) treats the modern meaning system of lawyers as much like that of aborigines, in that it provides an interpretive framework for action.

Prevailing social movement theorists, like early management theorists, have perhaps moved a bit too far in the direction of taking actors' accounts as the gospel. They give too much credence to the stories their informants tell. Surmounting this problem is not easy, because if actors frame their behavior, both prospectively and retrospectively, in terms of rational calculation rather than in terms of emotions and sentiments, it may be empirically impossible to detect, much less prove, that their motives are otherwise. The typical sociological response under these circumstances is to assume that habits and sentiments, and not merely calculations, motivate actors. After all, for the average movement activist, there is little fame and glory and very little gold indeed in the pursuit of the rights of whales, or of women. Economists have long since learned to elide the question of whether we are primordially rational by declaring that they cannot predict people's preferences (this is the job of sociologists) but only the (rational) means by which people will pursue those preferences. That is, they hold no opinion about whether individuals will

prefer to save whales or to accumulate BMWs, but they can predict the means once they know the preference. Of course, they are so well able to predict the means because those means are spelled out in economic theories that are, in varying degrees of precision, available to all. We all know that the carrot of a promotion is a strong incentive to work hard, even if we do not know the formula for the optimal size of that carrot.

The economic perspective suggests that preferences (for saving whales, or fighting abortion) are determined by arational sentiments, but that the means to achieving those preferences are determined by rational calculation. This approach insulates social movement theorists from having to address the question of motives, and indeed much of recent social movement theorizing has moved in this direction. But this approach is inadequate in social movement theory, just as it is in management theory. It has been shown to be inadequate in management theory by a host of studies demonstrating that rational courses of action are historically contingent and socially constructed. If rational action is not invariant and predictable, then problematizing the particular frame of rational calculation itself becomes important. To that extent, social movement behavior has, as it has embraced the frame of rational calculation, become part of the wider empirical universe of organizational theory.

There is every reason to believe that this focus on rationality, among movement "entrepreneurs" and among social-science paradigm-entrepreneurs alike, will decline over time. In organizational theory, the pendulum has swung back and forth during this century, with periods of extreme rationalism (in theory and in corporate practice) followed by corrective periods when "Theory Y" about the importance of the group, or some version of psychobabble, take over (Barley and Kunda 1992). Social movement theory has recently had its first big swing toward rationalism. The time is ripe for a swing back toward theories that take emotions, culture, narratives, metaphors, and norms into account.

If and when the field of social movements swings back toward passions and emotions, will the lesson be that social movement participants are really motivated by their hearts rather than by their heads? It seems to me that this isn't the lesson to be derived at all. Rather, if we make sense of the world through one of the cognitive frames available to us and if the rational actor model is but one of those frames, the passionate actor model is but another. To say that people *really* participate in movements because of their passions is little different from saying that they *really* act rationally. Perhaps the more important question before us concerns where these frames come from in the first place, and how we select among them in explaining our own behavior to ourselves.