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► **To cite this version:**

Christopher Rootes. Political Opportunity Structures - promise, problems and prospects. La Lettre de la Maison Française d'Oxford, 1999, 10, pp.71-93. hal-02553717

**HAL Id: hal-02553717**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02553717>**

Submitted on 2 Jun 2020

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## *Political Opportunity Structures promise, problems and prospects*

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Christopher ROOTES

**P**olitical actors make history, but they do not do so in circumstances of their own making. Instead, they encounter constraints and are presented with opportunities configured by the institutional arrangements and the prevailing patterns political power which are the inescapable contexts of political action. There has recently been a tendency to refer to these contexts of action as « political opportunity structures ». Sociologists - even political sociologists - have tended to underestimate the importance of political institutions, and it may be advantageous, particularly in comparative analyses, to give more weight to the structural dimensions of the political contexts of collective action than sociologists have been accustomed to do. Nevertheless, the usage of the term « political opportunity structure » has become indiscriminate. The concept may indeed be useful, but it is most likely to be useful if we resist the temptation to make it ever more inclusive in the vain attempt to explain everything, and if instead we confine it to those elements of the political context of collective action which are genuinely structural.

### **Promise**

The state is central in modern societies, and it is correspondingly important to the strategies and outcomes of collective action. Why, then, is it only recently that social movements' relations with the state have become the object of systematic study? One reason is that, until the late 1980s, social movements tended to be studied chiefly by sociologists whose focus was upon the motivations for and social bases and organisation of social movements as collective behaviour. Social movements' character as political action directed toward and developing in relation to states and established political actors was relatively neglected as sociologists treated the state and political institutions as epiphenomenal.

By comparison with sociologists, political scientists have neglected the study of social movements, principally because there is in political science an understandable bias toward the state and its institutions, and toward the most mainstream and institutionalised forms of political

mobilisation. Social movements, especially in the early stages of their development, often appear too marginal to be worthy of much attention, too ephemerally organised or, sometimes, too little differentiated from semi-institutionalised pressure and interest group politics, and their significance too much inflated by political propagandists and naively utopian sociologists.

In recent years, however, there have been signs of convergence between the perspectives and concerns of sociologists and political scientists. One consequence is the recent popularity of the term « political opportunity structure ». Perhaps the most widely cited work to employ the concept is Kitschelt's (1986) article on anti-nuclear movements in France, West Germany, Sweden and the USA.

Kitschelt (1986: 59) argued that political opportunity structures function « as filters between the mobilization of the movement and its choice of strategies and its capacity to change the social environment ». The crucial dimensions of these political opportunity structures are the openness or closedness of states to inputs from non-established actors and the strength or weakness of their capacities to deliver the effective implementation of policies once they are decided. Kitschelt's schematic representation of state structures produces a two by two matrix into which the four cases are neatly fitted: Sweden is open and strong, the USA open and weak, France closed and strong, West Germany closed and weak.

Kitschelt hypothesizes that, depending on their openness or closedness on the input side, and their strength or weakness on the output side, states encourage movements to adopt strategies which are either assimilative or confrontational. States which are open and weak invite movements to work through the multiple points of access provided by established institutions, but where systems are closed and strong, « movements are likely to adopt confrontational, disruptive strategies orchestrated outside established policy channels » (Kitschelt 1986: 66).

Kitschelt's approach has several considerable virtues. It develops a clear, economical account of the impact of state structures upon political challengers, and this produces testable propositions - hypotheses - and a clear focus upon that relatively neglected dimension in writing about social movements and the state. It is, moreover, explicitly comparative, and it appeared at a time when American sociologists were increasingly interested

in comparative analyses and were rediscovering the state. The promise that Kitschelt's work appeared to fulfil was to bring the state back in and to place it at the centre of comparative studies of social movements.

## **Problems**

Yet, for all the enthusiasm which greeted Kitschelt's work, problems in his analysis soon became apparent.

### **Induction rather than hypothesis testing?**

For all the ostensibly hypothetico-deductive form of his argument, the process which led Kitschelt to his formulations appears to have been essentially inductive. Yet the cases appear to have been trimmed to fit the categories and this raises the question of whether those categories are analytically independent of the empirical cases - or whether they were in fact *post hoc* attempts to put structural boxes around the (suitably simplified) characteristics of the four empirical cases considered. How might any fifth case fit into this matrix? Nevertheless, especially in the early stages of theory-building, induction is scarcely a sin, so to accuse Kitschelt of inductivism is not a devastating critique. The problem is that Kitschelt represents as « hypotheses » his « deductions » about the effects of structure on movement strategies. The suspicion persists that he has not so much « deduced » these strategies as *described* actual developments. Not only do the categories appear more descriptive than analytical, but, lacking convincing independent evidence of cause, the argument appears to an even moderately sceptical observer to be tautological.

### **Characterisation of the German case**

Any very schematic representation of a political system risks being accused of oversimplification, but Kitschelt's characterisation of the West German system struck many students of comparative politics as very odd indeed. Kitschelt categorised the federal and highly decentralised West German political system as « closed » to new political inputs by social movements. To describe as « closed » a decentralised federal system blessed with many accessible points of access through the political and judicial systems appeared curious, but this classification was especially surprising in view of the fact that Nelkin and Pollak (1982), who also studied the anti-nuclear movement, contrasted what they saw as the relatively « *open* » West German system with the quite « closed » French

system and, like Kitschelt, analysed the consequences of these contrasting political configurations for the anti-nuclear movements in each country.

### **Determinism?**

Certainly Kitschelt's argument appears to be overly determinist. When Rucht (1990) re-examined the development of anti-nuclear movements in France, West Germany and the USA, he concluded that the effects of structures upon actors' strategies were much less determinate than Kitschelt suggested: in all three countries a mixture of assimilative and confrontational strategies was employed; strategies changed over time and in response to specific events; the number of people arrested in acts of civil disobedience was highest in the supposedly « open » USA; and more people participated in « confrontational » demonstrations in West Germany than in more « closed » France. Rucht suggests that to categorise the dominant mode of actors' strategies in each country as neatly as Kitschelt did is, at the very least, to obscure the complexities of collective action as it developed in interaction between protesters and the authorities. Similarly, Flam (1994: 308), summing up the fruits of a comparative study of the development of anti-nuclear movements in eight west European nations, suggests that « there is much variation in the actual openness among both the « closed » and the « open » states ». Kitschelt's theory, she argues, should therefore be rejected.

### **Confounding structure and contingency**

The central problem with Kitschelt's approach is the way in which he confounds structure and contingency. Suggestive though Kitschelt's article is, it is chiefly valuable for the way it unintentionally exposes a major weakness in most attempts to employ the concept of political opportunity structure, for it tends to conflate genuinely structural features of political systems with aspects of them which, because they change relatively quickly and are themselves shaped by relatively durable institutional arrangements, are more properly recognised as *contingent* or conjunctural features of those systems.

It was this failure to distinguish between the structural and the contingent or conjunctural which led Kitschelt to categorise the West German political system as « closed » whereas Nelkin and Pollak had seen it as relatively « *open* ». It was certainly the case that the West German system had at various times been relatively closed to one set of protesters or another (relatively, that is, by comparison with the United States or Sweden,

if not by comparison with France), but those instances of closure were essentially contingent upon the political strategies and tactics of other political actors rather than effects of structures. Moreover, the strategies and tactics of the governments and other political actors whom social movement actors opposed were themselves conjunctural rather than structurally determined.

Scott (1990: 140) suggests that the failure of interest intermediation by traditional political institutions and actors is the general condition favouring the emergence of new social movements. Similarly, Rootes (1990) concludes that the most general condition of political systems that stimulated the development of radical student movements was the absence of effective opposition. Perhaps the most unambiguous instance of such a condition obtained in West Germany from 1966 to 1969 when the country was governed by a Grand Coalition of the CDU and SPD. This marked the penultimate stage of the SPD's decade-long struggle to represent itself as a moderate political party, shorn of its marxist past, and ready for the responsibilities of office. In the course of these years, the SPD not only abjured socialism in favour of social democracy but it expelled its youth wing on the grounds of the latter's excessive radicalism. The closures of political access these developments entailed led directly to the emergence of the APO (Extra-Parliamentary Opposition), itself an antecedent of both the anti-nuclear movements and the Greens. The SPD continued into the 1970s and early 1980s as an essentially conservative party of government, wedded to NATO and closed to an anti-nuclear movement which drew together the left and the peace movement.

Certainly during this period, the West German polity was relatively closed to the left, and clearly such a closure of political access had the effect of changing the balance of opportunities for political action of various kinds, but these changes were not institutionalised - the West German constitution remained federal and thus formally open. Nor were they in any meaningful sense « structural » ; they were essentially contingent - a product of the SPD's strategy for power - and, by comparison with the typical lifespans of political institutions, they were relatively short-lived. To assimilate such closures of political access to « structures » is simply confusing.

Kitschelt, by characterising the West German system as « closed », confounded structure and contingency. This has been a pervasive problem

with « political opportunity structure ». The very loose and catholic way in which « structure » has been used has not only done violence to the English language but, by failing to discriminate between more or less enduring structural conditions, on the one hand, and contingently or conjuncturally variable aspects of political systems and situations, on the other, it has deepened confusion rather than producing enlightenment.

One reason this confusion has tended to pervade the discussion is because there has been a slippage between the way the term « structure » has generally been used in political science and the way it has been used by sociologists. Whereas traditional political science has tended to equate « structure » with formal political and especially governmental institutions, sociologists in general deal with « institutions » which are less formally structured. Moreover, most sociologists are professionally disposed to view with scepticism the world of appearances as constituted by formal institutions - hence their tendency to neglect the state and formal, institutionalised politics, or to treat them as merely epiphenomenal. Furthermore, sociologists are generally concerned to demonstrate that the informal and uninstitutionalised practices of social life are not random and chaotic but patterned or « structured ». Thus sociologists, in the effort to achieve some critical penetration of the veil of appearances, speak of « structured social inequality » and, indeed, of the « structure of opportunity ».

The slippage between the traditional political scientific and the sociological uses of « structure » is understandable because the concepts and vocabulary of sociology have frequently been employed by students of politics in the endeavour to make critical a discipline which, especially in Europe, has often been so preoccupied with the formal structures of government and politics as sometimes uncritically to accept that political institutions actually perform in practice the way they are formally supposed to perform. More particularly, it is understandable that political scientists who come to be interested in those forms of collective action which fall outside the confines of traditional, conventional, formally institutionalised politics should look beyond the conventional armoury of political science and borrow from more adventurous neighbours in sociology.

There is at least circumstantial evidence that the term « political opportunity structure » made its way into political science from the sociology of deviance through the study of urban politics and especially

black urban politics in the USA. Peter Eisinger (1973) is usually credited with inventing the term. In fact, Eisinger appears to have used the term only once (p. 25); mostly he referred simply to « opportunity structure » or used the expression « structure of political opportunities ». Although there is no direct reference in Eisinger's article to the deviance literature, his subsequent (1974) article cites Merton (1957) on the consequences of political nonconformity, so it is probable that Eisinger was familiar with Merton's essay in the same volume which argues that deviance is best seen as the pursuit of normal aspirations by people without the opportunities for conventional means of realising such aspirations. In any case, the term « structure of political opportunities » had already found some currency in urban sociology and politics through Greer and Orleans's (1962) article.<sup>60</sup> Greer and Orleans do explicitly refer to the literature on deviant behaviour: « the term « opportunity structure » as used here has the same denotation as when it is used by Cloward in his discussion of deviant behaviour » (Greer and Orleans, 1962: 636, n.6). Greer and Orleans also refer to « the structure of political and parapolitical opportunities »; given the confusions that have followed, it is perhaps unfortunate that the distinction between the political and the parapolitical has not been more widely employed.

More recent work, notably that of Tarrow (1991), Kriesi (1995) and Kriesi *et al* (1992, 1995), has gone a long way toward clarifying the discussion of « political opportunity structures » by clearly distinguishing between the formal institutional structure of the state, the informal procedures and prevailing strategies used to deal with challengers, and the configuration of power and alliances in the party system. But, although this is clearer than Kitschelt's conceptualisation, it is nevertheless the case that the further one moves away from the formal institutional structure, the further behind one leaves the genuinely structural, and the more one is in the realm of arrangements which are essentially contingent and relatively unstable over time, and it is simply confusing to describe such contingent constellations as « structures ».

Tarrow (1991: 34-6), following Jenkins and Perrow, distinguishes four main « aspects of opportunity »: the openness or closedness of the polity, stability or instability of political alignments, presence or absence of allies or support groups, divisions within the elite and its tolerance or intolerance

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<sup>60</sup> I am grateful to Chris Pickvance for drawing this to my attention.



of protest. Tarrow appears ambivalent about whether to label these « political opportunity structure », referring at one point to « systemic and proximate opportunity factors ». However, important though all are to the outcomes of protest, only the first is genuinely structural; the others are all essentially contingent. Tarrow (1994: ch.5) is content to embrace all as changing and stable aspects of political opportunity structures which, given that he clearly - and rightly - ascribes greater explanatory value to the former than the latter, seems particularly perverse.

In his discussion of the « configuration of power in the party system », the third broad dimension of political opportunity structure in his analysis, Kriesi identifies the electoral system as the source of the main impact of the formal institutional structure. However, most of what follows from the impact of the electoral system is surely better described as the contingent product of this structural aspect of the political system than as anything which is structural in its own right.

Kriesi *et al* (1995: 53) treat as a stable part of political opportunity structures « national cleavages structures » - traditionally politicised cleavages between centre and periphery, religious confessions, rural and urban interests, and classes. Although they treat « alliance structures » separately as « the less stable elements of the political opportunity structure », they include party systems as formal institutional structures and regard the « prevailing strategies » employed by established members of the political system in their dealings with challengers as the informal accompaniment of those structures (ch.2). The latter seems especially unfortunate because, whilst « the predominant patterns » of such strategies may indeed be « deeply embedded », their employment is more contingent or conjunctural than the analysis of Kriesi *et al* would appear to suggest.

It needs to be recognised that states and different state institutions treat different social movements and movement organisations in different policy areas differently both generally and at different points in time. Tarrow (1994: 90-2) clearly recognises this when he warns against « the seductions of statism » and cites the diversity of US official responses to different challengers on different issues at different times. Similarly, in Britain the predominant pattern may be one of « informal inclusion » (Kriesi *et al* 1995:37), but that inclusion has not been extended equally to all groups or at all times (Rootes 1997). We need to pay more attention to the complexity of state structures, to the contingent and conjunctural aspects of

state responses to collective action, and to the difficulties such complexity poses to attempts to advance global characterisations of even relatively formal institutional structures.

The characterisation of a national political opportunity structure needs to be carefully qualified. British governments have responded to different movements in a more differentiated way than a strictly structural conception of political opportunities would allow. They have, in particular, been more accommodating to the environmental movement than to the anti-poll tax movement or to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Moreover, the attempt to characterise a whole political system overgeneralises and obliterates the sociologically crucial consideration that different individuals, groups and classes of actors are differently resourced for different kinds of political action. Thus the most salutary lesson of resource mobilisation theory is missed, while its chief limitation - the assumption of calculative rational choice as the basis of action - is faithfully reproduced. Explanations of social movements' choice of tactics need as well to take account of the political values of the actors and the ways in which tactical and strategic preferences are dictated by those values. Nor should they entirely discount the affective or emotional satisfactions of certain kinds of action; collective action is often carnival or political theatre as well as simple politics.

### **Prospects**

The concept of political opportunity structure is overloaded by being extended beyond those elements of the environment of collective action which are genuinely structural to others which are contingent or simply conjunctural. Many aspects of the development, strategy and outcomes of collective action are influenced by just such a range of contingent and conjunctural factors, factors which can only be encompassed by the concept of political opportunity structure at the expense of extending the term further than either theoretical parsimony or fidelity to the English language sensibly permit.

Many of the contextual factors which shape collective action are contingent or conjunctural, but some are more contingent or conjunctural than others; some are relatively fixed, while others are highly variable. Although the

extent to which this is so itself varies from time to time and from place to place, it is possible to hazard some generalisations about the relative fixedness or variability of the principal factors involved. What follows is an attempt to arrange these dimensions starting with the most fixed and moving at last to the most contingently or conjuncturally variable.

### **Political institutional structures**

The governmental institutions of national states are relatively fixed and enduring. They can and do change, but fundamental changes amounting to political revolutions are rare and, in advanced capitalist societies, unknown. Constitutional changes, at least in those states where constitutions are taken seriously, are usually modest and infrequent. Electoral systems are of immense significance for the development and outcomes of oppositional challenges (for their impact upon environmental movements and Green parties, see Richardson and Rootes 1995), but even electoral systems, in most cases a relatively minor technical detail of democratic systems, are in most systems remarkably stable over time. If the status of these formal institutional arrangements as « political opportunity structures » is unambiguous, that of the informal practices associated with them is more problematic.

The problem is especially acute in a « stateless » society like Britain, in which the absence of a written constitution and the prevalence of custom and convention makes the identification of stable political opportunity structures particularly difficult. Nevertheless, it is still a question of degree: the customs and conventions which are fundamental to the British « constitution » had, until 1980, changed relatively little and only gradually in a hundred years. France, despite significant changes of political system during the last six decades, is often argued to have been characterised by an administrative continuity so strong as to justify the characterisation of the French system as « immobile » or « stalled » (see, e.g., Crozier 1973).

The strictly political contexts of collective action are not, however, confined to the level of national government. Local and regional political systems may be at least as important, especially in less centralised states such as federal Germany or confederal Switzerland. Where they are subsidiary to central government, local and regional systems may be less durable than national political systems, but they are nevertheless relatively stable over time.

The international political context is more problematic. The impact of international political developments upon collective action within states is sometimes profound, most obviously in the case of peace movements. The establishment of inter- and supra-national organisations such as the United Nations and the European Union and increasingly elaborate attempts to regulate international conduct by treaties and conventions cannot disguise the fact that this is still an arena of only contingently stable political arrangements. Nevertheless, such arrangements have, during the past half century, brought a large measure of stability into relations between the states of the industrialised world and, for the moment, constitute a relatively stable part of the political environment. The intrusion of events, and the diffusion of ideas and examples from across national boundaries is another, and more contingent, matter.

Also problematic is the status of such features of political systems as party systems and political alliances. Although these are often of long standing, to assimilate them to political structures is to minimise the extent to which they are contingent upon those structures. The rearrangement of party systems and alliances which has taken place in Italy and New Zealand in response to the transformation of those countries' electoral systems (away from proportional representation in Italy and toward it in New Zealand) is a clear demonstration of that. But party and alliance systems are not simply the contingent products of electoral systems; they are also the legacies of cultural differences and historical conjunctures. Yet even these legacies are not immutable; for them to continue to be influential, they must be reproduced in practice. If the institutional supports for practice are dismantled, consciousness often proves surprisingly malleable. Party and alliance systems do indeed confront collective actors as relatively obdurate features of their environment but, given their essentially contingent character, it better serves the purposes of analysis to exclude them from the concept of political opportunity structures.

The authors whose conception of political opportunity structure is closest to that advocated here are Diani and van der Heijden (1994: 368). They treat the more fluid aspects of political context as aspects of « conflict management » and restrict the term « political opportunity structure » to « the legal-political framework that any movement has to confront when making its claims », those « variables that may be expected to remain relatively stable, at least in the mid term.: openness of political and legal-administrative institutions and the number of actors in a given

polity ». »Quite why the number of actors in a polity should be a structural feature is not clear since it is in principle considerably more variable than the other elements of the legal-political framework; historically, the number of actors has varied, sometimes quickly.

### **Social and cultural contexts**

The impact of social and cultural conditions upon collective action is profound and, because the principal components of social structure and culture frequently appear so resistant to all but the most glacial processes of change, it is tempting to treat them as fixed elements of the environment of collective action. Nevertheless, if the institutions of politics are so relatively stable over time as to be capable of being treated as if they were inert, the social and cultural contexts of collective action are, in principle, in a state of eternal flux, reproduced by the plethora of informal practices of whole populations. Because social and cultural change usually occurs in an incremental, even evolutionary, way, it may, while it is occurring, be so gradual and so apparently contradictory that it is only with the benefit of long hindsight that its impact can be assessed. Viewed from the perspective of analysis of any particular instance of collective action, both social structures and culture are likely to appear both relatively stable and changing.

If society and culture usually appear as the fixed backdrop to action, longer perspective reveals the importance of social and cultural changes to the shaping of collective action. Changes in demographic and occupational structures were an important factor underlying the rise of radical student movements and women's movements from the mid-1960s, and the importance of changes in the balance of resources available to collective actors is a factor systematically recognised in Resource Mobilisation Theory, the new orthodoxy in the theory of social movements.

The impact of culture is more controversial but the concept of « political culture » has lately been rehabilitated, with the result that both the durability of political cultures and their capacities for change are now better recognised. Values (Inglehart 1977, 1990), knowledge (Eyerman and Jamison 1991) and repertoires of political action (Tilly 1988) may be modified or created in the course of collective action, but they are nevertheless in large part the products of the actions of past actors. This cultural inheritance is part of the environment in which, and some of the material with which, collective actors must work in order to fashion their

action. However, because it, like social relations generally, must be reproduced by practice and in the course of being reproduced is inevitably modified, it cannot sensibly be assimilated to « structure ».

### **Ideas, knowledge, values and repertoires**

If ideas, knowledge, values and repertoires constitute part of the relatively stable cultural background to collective action, they are also key variables in the stimulation of collective action. The apparent stability of social structural and cultural conditions is achieved by looking at them as highly aggregated phenomena in macro-historical perspective. But if the background to collective action can fairly be painted with a broad brush, particular instances of such action are generally responsive to short-term changes. A brush sufficiently broad to paint the outlines of a national culture will be unsuitable for the sketching of the details of the particular contexts of actual instances of collective action; ideas and values which are mere details in the big picture of national cultures may be extremely potent in the shaping of particular local actions.

The broad picture of popular culture may be irrelevant to the ideas, values, perceptions and actions of agitated minorities. Active participation in collective action, especially the less conventional and more contentious kinds of direct action, is both a minority activity and one extremely socially skewed in its heavy over-representation of the highly educated and the relatively young (Barnes, Kaase *et al* 1979, Dalton 1988: 68-70, Parry, Moyser & Day 1992). It is therefore the perceptions, knowledge, ideas and values of relatively small minorities of the population which are crucial to the formulation of repertoires and strategies of collective action. The perceptions and values of the mass of the population may be more important to the responses to that action - and may thus play a part in shaping its course and ultimate outcome - but they are less obviously important than are the perceptions and values of the elites who have the power to shape the official reaction to the challenges of collective action.

The impact of state structures and other contextual « givens » upon collective action is never direct and unmediated; it is always mediated by the perceptions and evaluations of the actors and their adversaries and allies. Much depends upon how political opportunities and actions are « framed » (Gamson and Meyer 1996). For those taking collective action, it is not simply a question of whether a political system is objectively open or closed, but also whether (and how) it is *perceived* to be open or closed. But

even the perceived existence of opportunities and constraints does not mean that they will automatically be seized or accepted. Collective actors do not simply shape their action to fit the pre-existing contours of the political landscape. Actors' beliefs and values may constrain them from seizing opportunities which are presented to them, and may also stimulate them to seek to create new opportunities for action consistent with their values by attempts to surmount rather than meekly to accept existing constraints. The extent to which they do so varies, not least in accordance with the dictates of the values and political theories to which those actors subscribe. Some theories permit or encourage strategies and forms of action which are likely to lead to success in given circumstances, whereas others dictate strategies which inhibit the seizing of opportunities and produce few desired effects (Bouchier 1979, Breines 1980, 1982, 1989).

Nor are actors' values and theories immutable. In attempting to develop a corrective to resource mobilisation theory's treatment of values as peripheral and « political opportunity structures » as fixed features of political systems which similarly constrain all groups, whatever their ideological motivation, Dalton (1994) hypothesised that environmentalism, like other social movement activity, is « ideologically structured action » in which the values and theories which guide action so profoundly shape it that ideologically kindred groups act similarly even in radically different political systems. However, after comparing « new social movement » organizations, like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, with older, politically more conventional conservation and wildlife protection groups in 10 EC states, Dalton found the expected differences between new « ecological » and older « environmental » organizations to be surprisingly muted. Environmentalist action is, Dalton concluded, « ideologically structured » but, as practical action designed to achieve results, it is also profoundly shaped by the locally prevailing patterns of opportunities and constraints.

Not all social movements are equally shaped by political opportunity structure. Kriesi (1995: 192-3) distinguishes between « conjunctural » movements which are heavily dependent on the political opportunity structure and which react strongly to changes in it, and « linear » movements which are much less affected. Subcultural movements may be relatively insulated from the effects of the political opportunity structure, whereas countercultural movements, because « they constitute their identity mainly in conflictual interactions with authorities or third parties », are

much more susceptible. Instrumental movements such as the environmental movement, Kriesi suggests, are particularly vulnerable to the impact of the political opportunity structure. Rucht (1988) argues that environmental movements are reactive and instrumental and produce strong organisations, whereas movements such as the women's movement are proactive and expressive, rely upon grassroots mobilisations, and do not produce strong and durable organisations. Yet in the US, unlike western Europe, there are strong formal women's organisations. The explanation, he suggests, lies in the character of US political culture and the political institutional setting; the culture is strongly pragmatic and relatively open access to the decision-making system encourages lobbying (Rucht 1988: 323-4).

The strategies and tactics adopted by actors are influenced by their values and theories, but those values and theories are embedded in historical and social contexts and so too are strategies and tactics. Repertoires of political action are, as Tilly has so ably demonstrated, built up over long periods of history, so that whilst a new generation of actors does not simply reproduce past forms of action and may well be creative in its employment and development of them, innovation tends to be modest and incremental. Thus, irrespective of actors' values, the repertoire of actions available in a particular place and at a particular time is limited and so is likely to moderate the differences between actions inspired by different values.

Given how much has been written about the role of values in the shaping of political action, the relative neglect of cognition is surprising, for what actors « know » or perceive to be true about political situations is at least as important to the construction of collective action as is their evaluation of what they « know » or perceive (Rootes 1983). Both erroneous knowledge and ignorance have consequences. The belief that opportunities are lacking will generally discourage collective action even when the actual obstacles are few but, on the other hand, although the erroneous belief that few or no obstacles to successful collective action exist may serve to encourage action, it will probably only rarely be sufficient to impel the creation of opportunities where none existed. Actors' perceptions of the pattern of opportunities and constraints that confront them are thus extremely important to the decision to act and to the choice of strategies and tactics employed in the pursuit of collective goals.

No less important are the perceptions of the adversaries and actual or potential allies of collective actors. If potential allies perceive the goals and



the strategies of collective actors as compatible with their own, and judge the latter's chances of success to be high, they are more likely to act in ways which enhance the opportunities for collective action to achieve success; if, on the other hand, potential allies' perceptions diverge radically from those of collective actors, they are more likely to remain bystanders or even to obstruct what they may perceive to be counterproductive action.

Perhaps even more important to the shaping of collective action are the perceptions of the actual or potential adversaries of collective action. The responses of established political elites to collective action vary according to their perception of the legitimacy of the aims and social characteristics of collective actors and the forms of collective action. A form of action which is tolerated when taken by one class of actors may be repressed when taken by another. A crucial factor here is authorities' perceptions of the threat collective action poses either to their own security or to public order generally, or alternatively, their perceptions of the degree of support or sympathy for collective actors among the wider public or, especially, strategic groups. If perceptions of elites are important determinants of their strategic responses to collective action, no less so are those of their agents, the police. There is now a great deal of evidence that police responses to protest are greatly influenced by their perceptions of the threat to order posed by collective action, and that those perceptions are in turn influenced by their perceptions of the aims and social characteristics of the protesters (della Porta 1996). Police are less likely to perceive as threatening - and so are less likely brutally to repress - the readily intelligible and « legitimate » industrial protests of working class family men than what they perceive to be the ideologically-motivated actions of young, socially deviant « professional demonstrators ».

Neither the perceptions of collective actors nor those of their allies and adversaries should be seen in isolation. Although the perspectives of elites and challengers can be represented in a highly schematic and stereotypical way, such abstract generalisations are of limited heuristic value because perceptions are not fixed but are products of a complex process of interaction in which past actions, received reputations, present actions and declared intentions are all involved. Because so much of this interaction is highly contingent and essentially conjunctural, the perceptions which are crucial to the outcomes of encounters between collective actors and others are constantly being formed and revised.

### **Structure and action**

It is no accident that the structural approach has been developed in the context of attempts at comparative analysis. When comparing any political phenomena, especially phenomena as complex as collective political action, the analyst is drawn to what appear to be the fixed points in a turning world: the structural arrangements of social and political systems. But as we have seen, the metaphor of « structure » is problematic, and especially so as one moves beyond the most entrenched institutional arrangements of political systems. Particular problems arise when fixity - and structural status - is attributed to phenomena which, with the benefit of a wider lens or a longer time exposure, would be seen to be contingent or simply conjunctural. Yet without the assumption of structural pattern, comparative analysis would be impossible. The desire to compare springs from the search for systematic knowledge of the causes of phenomena, both of the cases we know least about, and also, perhaps especially, better to understand those which are most familiar to us. One of the chief virtues of comparative analysis is its capacity to stimulate us to ask searching questions about cases with which our familiarity has bred uncritical acceptance of received wisdoms. If assumptions of structure are essential to comparative analysis, it is important not to abandon structural analysis, but to recognise its limitations, and the need to complement it with other strategies.

The search for structural regularities and predictability should not be allowed to obscure the fact that explanations in such terms are inevitably partial. It is important not to overlook the fact that social movements are, as John Dunn (1972: 233) said of revolutions, « performances of great complexity ». It is not a matter of choosing between explanations in terms of action or of structure, but of devising explanations that properly balance considerations of both. Collective action is a dialectical process, a complex journey toward an imprecisely defined destination with side-trips and diversions, with opportunities seized or foregone, constraints avoided, surmounted or conceded in a series of more or less complex interactions with other actors encountered in its course.

It is tempting to be impressed by the uniqueness of each case (see Flam, 1994:303), but to do so would imply the abandonment of any attempt to theorise the relationship between collective action and its political contexts on the grounds that there are so many dimensions of possible variation and the relationships among them are so indeterminate that any attempt at

theorising would amount to little more than a systematised description of past experience.

Yet it is not necessary to reach such a radical conclusion. Diani and van der Heijden (1994:378--380), considering the same cases as Flam, conclude that whilst there is a great deal about anti-nuclear movements which cannot be explained in terms of political opportunity structures, the concept can be useful in explaining the early stages of movement development. More generally, they suggest that much about anti-nuclear movements could be understood by considering the interplay between political opportunity structures and elite responses.

Because the development of collective action is a dialectical process, it is unrealistic to expect a structural theory of such action to have great predictive power. As Tarrow has observed, it is the non-structural dimensions of the political context which appear most consequentially to shape opportunities for political challengers. Yet the concept of political opportunity structure, stripped of its excess baggage, may nevertheless have heuristic value, especially in the initial stages of comparative research. If we are unable to propose a systematic theory of the impact of political context upon collective action, we can certainly be clearer about the dimensions of context involved and about the extent to which any can sensibly be described as 'political opportunity structures'. There are many aspects of the context of collective action in which scrupulous investigation might discover pattern, but it is neither necessary nor desirable to label everything which displays pattern as 'structure'.

### **A concept in retreat?**

Recent American writing on the subject of social movement mobilisation has become increasingly cautious in its references to « political opportunity structure ». A comparison of the first and second editions of Tarrow's *Power in Movement* is instructive. In the first edition (1994:85), Tarrow introduces the discussion of « dimensions of opportunity » thus: « By political opportunity structure, I mean consistent - but not necessarily formal or permanent - dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure ». In the second edition (1998:76-7), the section heading remains but the words « political opportunity structure » are replaced by « the concept of political opportunity » and the subsequent discussion expunges all reference to « structure ».

Despite the fact that McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (1996:24), in their recent programmatic statement of an agenda for social movement research, unembarrassedly use the term « political opportunity structure »<sup>61</sup>, the straws were very clearly in the wind with the publication of McAdam, McCarthy and Zald's *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements* (1996). The editors and most of their contributors were careful in their avoidance of the term « political opportunity structure » and in their concern to lay out the various dimensions of political opportunity. Tarrow's contribution to that volume does use the term « political opportunity structure », but then it is clearly identified as an expansion of his 1994 chapter. Rucht, in another contribution to the same volume, talks about « mobilising structures » but avoids the term « political opportunity structure ».

In their chapter in the McAdam, McCarthy and Zald volume, Gamson and Meyer remarked that « the concept of political opportunity structure is in trouble, in danger of becoming a sponge that soaks up virtually every aspect of the social movement environment - political institutions and culture, crises of various sorts, political alliances, and policy shifts... It threatens to become an all-encompassing fudge factor for all the conditions and circumstances that form the context for collective action. Used to explain so much, it may ultimately explain nothing at all. » (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 275).

That is very much my argument here. Gamson and Meyer insist on the need to distinguish the « relatively stable elements of political opportunity » from the more volatile ones, the latter helping us « to understand movement outcomes as involving structures which shape and channel activity while, in turn, movements act as agents that help to shape the political space in which they operate » (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 289). That advice is eminently sensible, but when we use « political opportunity » in this second sense, we are no longer talking about political opportunity *structures*. Gamson and Meyer are careful enough not to suggest that we are but, even among those

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<sup>61</sup> NB Tilly's insistence (see his reply to Lichbach in *Mobilization* 2 (1)) that the synthesis which he, McAdam and Tarrow propose does not subsume the social and the cultural under POS but instead treats them as separate analytical dimensions which might be concatenated differently.\* Extract of a text presented at the IPSA XVIIth World Congress, Pannel M.T.3.3. "State and Society : New Actors and Movements"

who scrupulously avoid the promiscuous use of « political opportunity structure », there is still a confusing tendency to talk about « the structure of political opportunity » in a way that again obscures the distinction between what is relatively permanent and what is in principle more volatile.

Clearly, recent writers are acutely conscious of the problems that careless use of the term « political opportunity structure » has caused, but the remedy that appears to be emerging - the use of the term « political opportunity factors » or simply « political opportunity » - simply avoids the issue and, in so doing, it risks taking us back into the situation where the proposition that the development and outcomes of social movement mobilisations are the product of political opportunities is a simple tautology (see Meyer and Minkoff 1997). What is lost is the potentially useful - and testable - proposition that the formal structure of political opportunities as represented by the structures of political institutions is a powerful determinant of social movement development. The great virtue of Kitschelt's argument was that it clearly asserted such a relationship. The greater sophistication of more recent discussions is proof that we have learned much from the reaction against the oversimplification and confusion present in Kitschelt's article, but that sophistication has been achieved at the expense of abandoning a potentially useful concept. If « political opportunity structure » had become so catholic as to be vacated of discriminating content, even the definition seems now to be vacated.

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