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CONTENTIOUS POLITICS
Politics as Claims-Making

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Introduction

On 1st April 2019, eleven nearly naked protesters superglued themselves to the windows of the House of Commons public gallery, London. Their protest interrupted a parliamentary debate about the United Kingdom’s terms of exit from the European Union. The naked parts of their bodies were emblazoned with slogans emphasising the urgency of climate change, such as ‘for all life’. The protesters told the press that Brexit is much less important than the existential threat that climate change poses to life on earth (Elgot 2019). The protesters were an affinity group of Extinction Rebellion (XR), an activist network that aims: for government to adopt a climate emergency; for reduction of biodiversity loss; for greenhouse gas emissions to be eliminated to net zero by 2025; and for government to create and be guided by a citizens’ assembly on climate change (Extinction Rebellion 2018).

Later that month tens of thousands of XR protesters engaged in 10-days of non-violent civil disobedience bringing parts of the capital city to a standstill. The protests used established repertoires with innovations. Roads were blocked; impromptu street occupations/street parties broke out; the headquarters of oil company, Shell, was damaged to the tune of £6,000; Heathrow airport was disrupted; ‘die-ins’ were staged; and others even chained themselves to Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn’s home (BBC 2019). Citizens from many different walks of life participated in the protest, reportedly even Jeremy Clarkson, ex-Top Gear presenter, renowned for his love of gas guzzling cars. XR has spread to multiple other countries, including Australia, India, South America, the Solomon Isles, and Spain (Griffin 2019).

The British state responded with significant police deployment, including arresting many protesters and charging of hundreds of them. Remarkably, by June 2019, Theresa May’s otherwise failing Conservative government committed to reducing the UK’s carbon emissions to net zero by 2050. Furthermore, one of XR’s founder members, Gail Bradbrook, was invited to give evidence to a Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) department Select Committee that was considering the feasibility and need for making faster and deeper cuts to greenhouse gas emissions.

What is contentious politics? Contentious politics involves acts of resistance against another claims-maker in a non-conventional form protest, riots, and revolutions each count. And why start a chapter about contentious politics with this account? First, introducing a chapter
or book with a recent contentious episode is standard in the work of Sydney Tarrow and the late Charles Tilly, two founder members of the ‘contentious politics’ approach. Second, this episode provides the basis for an argument about the relevance of the contentious politics to understanding contemporary contention. It stresses the need to merge different aspects of social movement theory. Social movement theory has been concerned with understanding how collective action results from a combination of understanding grievances, resources, political opportunities, and framing, each of which are featured in this account. A shared grievance of XR activists is the threat to life on earth as we know it. Resources were brought to bear in terms of volunteers willing to take relatively high risk activism (McAdam 1989). The activists took advantage of divisions in the elite over Brexit in order to bring a different – more universalising – concern to politicians’ attention. And the debate is framed by activists as one that needs urgent government attention. Such an eclectic theoretical approach is beneficial because it allows us to focus on both strategic and normative dimensions of movements, as well as the range of different actors that are involved with or interact with social movements.

I proceed as follows. First, I introduce the main aims and aspirations of the contentious politics research programme, particularly through the lens of three books written by key authors of the approach: Dynamics of contention (McAdam et al. 2001), Contentious politics, Tilly and Tarrow (2015), and Contentious performances (Tilly 2008). Second, I apply this approach to XR. Third, I offer a critique of the approach, bearing in mind how it might be improved and that no theoretical framework for the study of contention will be universally appealing to scholars.

The contentious politics research programme

McAdam’s (2001) preface to Silence and voice in the study of contentious politics provide us with an account of the roots of the contentious politics approach. McAdam (2001) reports how he and Tarrow become increasingly concerned about the narrowness of social movement research in the 1990s. They subsequently began extensive dialogue with others to recognise the fruitfulness of studying different types of contention – from riots, revolutions, and civil wars through to more placid social movements – together. The result was Silence and voice, wherein ‘silences’ referred to concepts that had been neglected by social movement scholars, but had been recognised by scholars studying other forms of contentious politics.

Enter Dynamics of contention. This hugely ambitious book, sought to take a mechanistic approach to the study of contention. The key research questions, broadly, were ‘what allows contentious episodes to emerge and fade, and what shapes their repertoire?’. Contentious politics was defined as:

Episodic, public, collective interaction among makes or claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or party to the claims and (b) the claims would, if realized affect the interests of at least one of the claimants.

(McAdam et al. 2001, p. 5, Tilly and Tarrow 2015, p. 7)

McAdam et al. (2001) criticised the classic social movement agenda – which focused on mobilisation, resources, and political processes – for stasis – claiming it had overlooked interactions among actors and had reduced movements’ complexity to strategic calculation. This assessment was a little unfair on some scholars who had already moved beyond the bounds of classic social movement theorising (e.g., Diani 1995 on interactions, Taylor 1989 on non-strategic actions, and Lofland 1993 who took a broad view of social movements). Nonetheless, there
was probably not a single body of work that had addressed all three of their criticisms at once. They proposed two key solutions to resolving the problems they identified with existing theories. First, they insisted ‘on the uselessness of choosing [one] among culturalist, rationalist and structuralist approaches to contentious politics’ (p. 305), instead taking a strategy of employing ‘insights from all three where we found them useful’ (p. 305). Second, they sought to identify causal mechanisms that can explain a whole series of forms of political contention, that they call ‘contentious politics’.

Mechanisms are only a part of their story in relation to causality. Mechanisms concatenate into processes that result in spells of contention. Using very rich paired comparisons of very different episodes, they show that a set of mechanisms are evident across a broad range of forms of contention. Thus concatenation (or not) of mechanisms in different combinations results in processes thought to give shape and form to contention, that is facilitated or suppressed by political opportunities. ‘Processes’ combine environmental, cognitive and relational mechanisms (McAdam and Tarrow 2010, p. 531) and are defined as ‘regular sequences of … mechanisms that produce similar (generally more complex and contingent) transformations of those elements’ (McAdam et al. 2001, p. 24). The process of polarisation, for example, is defined as the ‘widening of political and social space between claimants in a contentious episode and the gravitation of previously uncommitted or moderate actors towards one, the other, or both extremes’ (p. 322). This process, ‘combines mechanisms of opportunity/threat spirals, competition, category formation and the omnipresent brokerage’ (McAdam et al. 2001, p. 322). Opportunity/threat spirals consist of sequences of political changes that are interpreted by challengers, resulting in collective action followed by the counteraction of members of the polity, causing future political changes. Competition involves different factions trying to gain allies and outbid competitors, as presupposed by resource mobilisation theory. Category formation creates divisions between a ‘we’ and a ‘them’, rather like in theorising about collective identity (Saunders 2008). And brokerage is the linking of two social sites that puts the previously disconnected into contact with one another. Let me provide an example of the role of mechanisms in shaping a particular episode.

McAdam et al. (2001) use their approach to reveal why contention led to civil war during the American Revolution in the 1800s, but to a peaceful transition to democracy in Spain in 1973. They identify four common mechanisms in both cases: brokerage (defined above); identity shift, the moving of identity markers; radicalisation, ‘increasing contradictions at one or both extremes of a political continuum’ that ‘drive political actors between the extremes into clear alliance’ (p. 189); and convergence whereby more radical actors make the demands of others appear acceptable to policymakers. They conclude that the relational mechanisms ‘combined with very different environmental mechanisms to produce divergent outcomes’ (p. 162). In the US case, brokerage existed only within oppositional forces, whereas in Spain it was across challengers and members. Identities of US challengers and members were juxtaposed, whereas there was identity shift among Spanish members. They found radicalisation of views in the United States, but convergence towards the middle ground in Spain.

Many felt bewildered by the Dynamics of Contention due to the complexity and depth of argumentation. It was a stroke of genius, but the vocabulary of mechanisms and processes was novel to many. The rich paired comparisons of episodes of contention made reading it cover-to-cover incredibly interesting, but not a task to be scoffed at.

In response, Tilly and Tarrow (2008, and updated in 2015) provided a simpler version of their argument in, Contentious Politics. Even the definition of contentious politics was simplified to ‘people struggling with each other over which political programme will prevail’ (Tarrow 2015, p. 4). The number of mechanisms discussed is limited, with more focus on
the three most important mechanisms that shape the emergence of contention: brokerage (explained above); diffusion – the spreading of contention or issues; and coordinated action – ‘mutual signalling and parallel making of claims on the same object’ (Tarrow 2015, p. 30). Other mechanisms sustain or curtail contention over time, such as: social appropriation, when usually non-political groups take up an issue; boundary activism, involving new boundaries between challengers and targets; certification, which is the support of an external body like the church; identify shift, when new identities emerge or re-emerge; competition among rival organisations; and escalation and radicalisation as action moves from the more mundane and routine to the more vigorous. These mechanisms, also introduced in the Dynamics of Contention, are easier to grasp in Contentious Politics.

Social bases and political contexts are intervening variables between combinations of mechanisms and more-or-less predictable forms of action (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, p. 22). They identify four types of regimes with proclivity to generate different types of contention. Democratic high capacity regimes are most likely to result in social movements, democratic low capacity regimes tend to foster coups or linguistic, religious, or ethnic group conflict. Undemocratic high capacity regimes, in contrast, are home to brief clandestine actions. Regime types and political opportunity structures dictate whether states will tolerate, prescribe or forbid certain behaviours, leading to contained contention where it is tolerated, but to transgressive contention where it is not. Hybrid regimes are illustrated to have the most unpredictable combinations of contention and outcomes, as in Ireland (historically), Israel-Palestine, and in the Middle East where the so-called Arab Spring has largely been reversed (except for Tunisia, where democracy is most successful, but still work in progress).

The chapter on social movements in Contentious Politics, among other things, compares the failure to sustain action and win policy gains in 1950s Poland, compared to success in the 1980s. In contrast to the 1950s, the 1980s witnessed the emergence of social movement bases – movement organisations and networks, participants, cultural artefacts, memories, and traditions. Support from the Catholic Church, provided certification. Both of these facilitated diffusion and scale shift. The Solidarity movement successfully used widespread disruptive strikes combined with a more traditional social movement repertoire of demonstrations and occupations. When Solidarity came into power as the Solidarity Party in 1989, the movement disintegrated.

The Polish Solidarity movement had a national locus, but Tilly and Tarrow (2015) sought to explain how some of their mechanisms operate transnationally. Among other things, they illustrate how international controversies can become domesticated, how national controversies can diffuse internationally and how information technologies allow for transnational brokerage.

Overall, the programme suggests that mechanisms combine into similar sequences and conditions, shaped by regimes and political opportunities. Contentious politics reacts to governmental action, but is also shaped by it. There is dynamic interplay between all actors involved. This final point is illustrated also in Tilly’s (2008) Contentious Performances. Before applying the contentious politics programme to XR, let us first visit the main arguments of Contentious Performances (Tilly 2008). The key concept is the ‘repertoire’, which, in its ‘strong’ variant dictates the types of actions that contenders draw upon, like theatre performances, with only small innovations (Tilly 2008, p. 15). Actors involved in contention draw on existing repertoires to the extent that the scope of actions they undertake are almost predictable. One of Tilly’s main tasks in Contentious Performances is to use descriptions and sophisticated content analysis (protest event analysis and subject-object-verb sequences) to understand why the repertoire of contention in Britain shifted from one archetype to another from eighteenth to
nineteenth century Britain. The eighteenth century involved gatherings outside the residences of wrong-doers, appropriating and reselling grain, looting and arson, targeted action against local enemies with the assistance of powerful patrons, and the use of symbolism – each with some variation across places shaped by local situations. By the nineteenth century, special interest groups were relatively common. These organised public meetings and mounted direct challenges to public authorities. Actions were carefully planned, resulting in repertoires that could be transferred more easily from place-to-place. Among other things, the shift towards this new dominant social movement repertoire is explained by the adaptation of parades and funeral processions to demonstrations, the centralisation of power making local targets less useful, and state accommodation of demonstrations and interest groups increasingly seen as a reasonable political participation. How can we apply this research programme to XR?

An application of the contentious politics programme to Extinction Rebellion

The contentious politics programme invites that we see the recent XR episode of contention as an outcome of mechanisms and processes. Methodologically, it might require charting trends in climate action, and working out what is responsible for peaks and troughs; perhaps comparing across regimes to check for identified mechanisms. The absence of such an in-depth analysis in this chapter might, therefore, make it appear superficial. Yet, on the other hand, it has the advantage of illustrating the intuitive appeal of the approach.

Let’s begin with the notion of repertoires. The XR protests have adopted what we might call the ‘civil disobedience repertoire’ of direct action in British environmentalism. Super-gluing, (semi-)nudity, occupations, blockades, street parties, affinity groups, etc. have been conducted in the living memory of many activists. This repertoire is used when protesters deem there to be a sense of urgency and when standard democratic channels for participation have failed to deliver change. Multi-targeted days of action also have a recent history. In this sense, Tilly’s (2008) notion of repertoires resonates strongly with XR, through the mechanism of emulation. There has also been diffusion of aims and actions to other countries.

One of the most fascinating aspects of recent climate activism in Britain is its relative success at changing government discourse in recognition of the need to massively reduce greenhouse gas emissions in Britain (even if not to XR’s standards). Also novel is the access that direct activists have had to decision-makers. The contentious politics programme helps us to understand how this has come about. The mechanisms of social appropriation (non-political groups have taken up the cause), brokerage (new networks have formed across challengers and the polity) and certification (respected organisations and individuals have supported it) have given XR momentum and prestige. XR continues to organise significant actions, illustrating that the relative acceptance of its demands has not dampened its activism.

Another interesting feature of XR is that it has triggered a counter-movement from a network called 5G Awareness and an associated Facebook page entitled ‘XR is a scam’. The countermovement argues that the founders of XR are not genuine rebels, they are instead intent on supporting the roll out of 5G and the ‘Internet of Things’. Concerns are raised about human health, ecology and domination of human lives. Some suspect that XR is an attempt to weed out the morally worthy by giving them a criminal record. Others suggest that XR is an attempt to funnel activists into pre-formed movements disarming them from tackling fresh concerns like 5G. Some of the arguments might seem rather far-fetched, but the countermovement activity provides an illustration of the process of polarisation. The process of polarisation, for example, is defined as the ‘widening of political and social space between claimants in a contentious episode and the gravitation of previously uncommitted or moderate actors
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towards one, the other, or both extremes’ (p.322). An opportunity to get climate change on the agenda is seen as a threat to stopping 5G. Category formation is also evident. Those believing XR is a scam say ‘they’ are not really rebels, ‘they’ want to support the digital agenda. Thus, the two campaigns exist in competition for attention.

Evaluating the contentious politics programme

McAdam and Tarrow (2010, p. 530) themselves admit that, ‘When it appeared in 2001, Dynamics of Contention was hardly greeted with universal acclaim by the fraternity of social movement scholars.’ This might be partly due to a long standing tendency to engage in ‘theory bashing’ (Lofland 1993) in social movement research. In theory bashing we might sometimes do damage to others’ approaches by making them fit an unfair caricature (Killian 1983, p. 4). Joining in the chorus of criticism, my critique centres on the programme’s apparent lack of focus and its unintended structural bent. Previously (Saunders 2013) I have critiqued the programme for being too linear, for lacking conceptual clarity and for its unclear guidance on how to apply it to one’s own research. These days I find my criticism of linearity inappropriate because of the dynamism in the stories between contenders and the state. I also find the concepts and methodological guidance a bit clearer, after repeated reading, although some reservations remain. Tilly and Tarrow (2015) have added fairly extensive methodological appendices to Contentious Politics and Tilly (2008) provides repeated step-by-step guidance. If there is a complaint to be made about the methodological guidance in Tilly (2008) it is simply that the guidelines are repeated so frequently that it is tiresome if reading the entire book. In response to criticism, the authors have had the modesty to admit that ‘part of the fault was … our own’ (McAdam and Tarrow 2010, p. 350), noting that the Dynamics of contention was not theoretically specific, that they looked at too many case studies across a broad array of regime types and that they bombarded readers with 21 pages of references and over 20 mechanisms which they ‘tossed off with little attempt at explanation or operationalization’ (McAdam and Tarrow 2010, p. 350). Let us visit some criticisms in more detail.

Broad but narrow: a state focus?

The attempt to craft a convincing research programme to shape the entire field of contentious politics has been viewed as an undesirable attempt to dominate the field (Flacks 2003). This might not have been the authors’ intention, but there are two negative consequences. First, in seeking to explain everything about contentious politics, important aspects for the study of social movements have inevitably fallen by the wayside. The emphasis is largely on episodes of contention, which means that the lens is turned away from the fascinating lulls between intense periods of activity, when different but equally interesting dynamics are at play. Community- and individual-level processes of social change of the sort that Welch and Yates (this volume) talk about are entirely overlooked. Although McAdam et al. (2001) attempt to reorient their study away from episodes to mechanisms and processes, they end up trying to understand only the mechanisms that (sometimes) lead to processes that (always it seems) result in episodes. The absence of research on periods of latency means also that they effectively lack a control group in which there is no contention with which to compare their cases of contention. Should the mechanisms they identify be present outside of periods of contention then their claim to have identified causality is exaggerated.

Second, making comparisons across very different types of contention leads to unbalanced treatment of cases causing what we might call chalk-and-cheese like comparisons. The
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question of how a regime changes (e.g., democratises) is a very different one from how a social movement repertoire emerges. Moreover, this is reflected in some seemingly odd methodological choices, particularly in relation to how episodes are ‘chopped up’ into manageable chunks of time for study, evident in the different time frames analysed. For example, the period 1985–1990 is showcased for Soule’s (1995) work on shanty-town protests for divestment against apartheid; whereas much longer periods of time are used to discuss de-democratisation (e.g., 1966–1983 in Argentina).

Another criticism is that the approach is state-centric. This latter charge, however, might rest partly on a misunderstanding of the approach. Tilly and Tarrow (2015) take a broad view of politics, arguing that politics affects us at all levels ranging from big events like whether the country decides to go to war, to very individualised actions like whether we obtain a driving licence. Thus, contentious politics does not need to be triggered by or be directed at the state. Instead it is involved at some level even if only indirectly through policing. What is deemed (il)legitimate by the state will certainly shape the willingness of individuals, groups, organisations, and networks to engage in particular repertoires. In Tilly’s (2008, p. 7) words: ‘let me rule out a possible misunderstanding at once. Restriction of contentious politics to claims making that somehow involves governments by no means implies that governments must figure as the makers or receivers of contentious claims’.

Nonetheless, this is an easy misinterpretation to make. The strong social movement repertoire that Tilly (2008) identifies has a state focus at its heart. He argues that routinisation of the social movement repertoire came in part from centralisation of power and the state’s tolerance to public displays of worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment. Therefore, Tilly’s own caricature of a social movement repertoire does, indeed, lead to some side-lining of cultural, lifestyle, and consumer movements.

Mische and Tilly (2003) defended McAdam et al.’s (2001) apparent ignorance of contention targeted elsewhere than the state. They stated that the original authors of the Dynamics of Contention simply needed to find a way to delineate the study. Understandably, ‘the exposition would become unmanageable if we said we’re looking at every form of contention everywhere’ (Mische and Tilly 2003, p. 90). This is a good justification, but why not look at a range of forms of social movement instead of broadening out to include other forms of contention? Although they claimed to build in cognitive mechanisms that speak to cultural elements of social movement theory, their presentation of them has been criticised for being ‘patently structural’ (Platt 2004, p. 112), and for belittling human agency (Jasper 2010, p. 968). As Platt (2004, p. 113) explains, ‘having theoretically attributed cultural agency … to activists in theory …they cannot shut down their volition by tying them to structural networks or by capriciously reclaiming the structural determination of their thinking and consciousness’.

Conceptual issues

Conceptual issues with the approach centre on definitions and the role of mechanisms and processes. According to Jasper (2010, p. 967), ‘The main weakness was how the authors defined – or didn’t define – mechanisms’. The authors themselves admit that calling mechanisms ‘events’ was confusing. In a subsequent rendition (McAdam and Tarrow [2011, p. 4], emphasis added), they replace ‘a delimited class of events …’ with ‘delimited changes …’ in their definition of a mechanism. This, however, does not solve a more fundamental set of problems. The treatment of mechanisms and processes is confusing. Mechanisms are often posited as independent rather than intervening variables. Processes and mechanisms are sometimes treated synonymously. Mechanisms sometimes coalesce into processes, and sometimes
they seem to work alone (see the paired comparison of the American and Spanish revolutions that I briefly discussed above). Furthermore, the score of mechanisms listed are not mutually exclusive; in the case of the successful Yellow Revolution in the Philippines against the Marcos dictatorship, their discussion of what they call ‘social appropriation’ appears to differ little from what they elsewhere call ‘brokerage’. The process of ‘polarisation’ is indistinct from ‘category shift’, which involves identities coalescing and the categorisation of social groups into a distinct ‘we’ and ‘them’. To add to the confusion, processes (rather than mechanisms) sometimes lead to other processes. For example, the process of scale-shift is thought to lead to the process of parliamentarisation. This results in mixing of the structural and agential levels, not to mention the organisational level. As Welskopp (2004, p. 128) notes with reference to the process of ‘identity shift’:

it is by no means clear how, at which level, and when ‘identity shift’ occurs and how it can be wrought into a broad social movement. Are we facing micro-processes that accumulate into macro dynamics? Are we looking for macro-effects of micro-change? Do we explain macro-processes by microfoundations?

McAdam et al. (2001) leave these as open questions. Perhaps more fundamentally, McAdam et al. (2001) seem to come close to ‘mechanism talk’ (Norkus 2005), which involves using mechanisms as magic bullets to explain things that do not fit standard theories. Along these lines, Hedström and Ylikoski (2010, p. 56) had the following appraisal of Tilly’s (2001) work:

Despite his inspiring empirical work, his general discussions of mechanism based explanation (e.g. Tilly 2001) left something to be desired. One gets the strong impression that he used the notion of mechanism as a label to refer to the kind of processes that he for other reasons was interested in.

Moreover, it is sometimes difficult to disentangle the forms of contention from the mechanisms that lead to them. The three most common mechanisms, remember, are brokerage, diffusion, and coordinated action. These lead to a variety of forms of contentious politics, which sits at the intersection of politics, contention, and collective action. It is impossible for collective action to occur without coordinated action, and the interactions among actors that are also part-and-parcel of the definition of social movements cannot exist without brokerage. Thus, we have something of a tautology at play.

**Methodological issues**

Potential methodological objections centre on deployment of competing research logics; the nature of evidence assembled, including reliance on secondary sources; and on how one approaches the production of analysable sequences of contentious performances known as episodes.

Tarrow and Tilly (2015) ask themselves which processes exist, whether they explain particular forms of contention, whether they work across a variety of forms of contention, and whether certain processes appear more in one regime than another. There is a variety of different analytical strategies at play: single episodes of contention, case comparisons, and both inductive and deductive identification of mechanisms, to name a few. This makes the book a very challenging read for anyone who is an epistemological purist. Indeed, Tilly (2008, p. 39) recognised that the approach is built on ‘some risky epistemological and ontological wagers’
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around the sources used, the extent to which causality can be identified and in relation to the generation of valid histories.

In relation to criticisms about the production of valid histories, it is important to point out that narratives of episodes of contention are compiled with reliance on others’ accounts of those episodes. The secondary accounts they refer to could have a peculiar historiographical bent that may miss allusion to mechanisms that did actually play a role in generating contention. Moreover, some illustrative case studies make use of longitudinal data from protest event analysis (of varying lengths), whereas others have stronger accounts of actors in power. The variation stems in part from the chalk-and-cheese comparisons I mention earlier, but also from unequal analysis of cases that are included to show the relevance of the same mechanisms.

Conceptual confusion combines with reliance on secondary sources to make it difficult to understand how McAdam et al. identified mechanisms (Flacks 2003, p. 101). This leads to suspicion that they found traces of their mechanisms in cases with which they were familiar and then retrofitted them onto other cases of contention. There is nothing wrong with post-hoc or deductive analysis, as such. However, this is exactly the sort of scholarship they are critical of in the Dynamics book. As Tilly stated in interview with Mische (Mische and Tilly 2003, p.85), for example: ‘People would match a set of events to the elements of a conceptual model … we say, this isn’t supposed to be happening. We’re supposed to be explaining these phenomena.’

In a 2008 article, McAdam et al. seek to redress this by offering ‘concrete demonstrations concerning how to identify coherent mechanisms’ (309). However, their proposed methodology remains difficult to follow. They give examples of three methodological processes and end up recommending triangulation. One of the three methods involves use of systematic event analysis to understand the process of scale-shift. Note the unhelpful shift here from trying to identify mechanisms to the actual practice of trying to understand them. In this example, Tilly identified 1,500 verbs describing action in the process of parliamentarisation in the United Kingdom. These were regrouped into 46 categories and also 8 very generic categories. McAdam et al. (2008) go on to state that:

With varying directness, the verbs serve as indicators for mechanisms of contention. In a given paired relationship, for example, an increase in the frequency of attack verbs indicates that ‘polarization’ is occurring, while an increase in the frequency of support verbs indicates that ‘co-ordinated action’ is gaining ground.

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In any case, support verbs can indicate tacit support, which does not always manifest in coordinated action, as they presume.

Conclusions

If the contentious politics programme has so many criticisms, why use it to understand an episode like XR, or at all? We should do well to remember that all movement theories come under the cosh for at least one of the following reasons: ontological underpinnings, epistemology, the trade-off between quality and quantity or the foci. The classic social movement theories of collective behaviour, resource mobilisation, political opportunities/processes, and new social movements have limitations of scope, generalisability, and linearity. The contentious politics research programme pushes at these existing limitations. The scope is widened, generalisability is not claimed but the search for common mechanisms across very different
types of contention hints at it, and there is dynamism in the longitudinal approach: charting how different actors from movements, state and society interact to produce interesting new outcomes. Moreover, the approach is open to a wide range of methodological approaches from historiography and protest event analysis and more. The reason for taking the contentious politics approach seriously is because there are few serious rivals that have these additional advantages.

Yet more could be done to improve the contentious politics approach, particularly around claims of causation and the utility of the work – why does it matter what causes contention if we do not know what makes it successful? If the language of mechanisms is to be retained, then a more truly mechanistic and causally oriented approach should be deployed. It does not take much unpacking of the work of McAdam et al. (2001) to identify the real causality in this research programme. More than anything, it seems that it is regimes and political opportunity structures that allow what they currently label as mechanisms to lead to different outcomes across different countries.

The emphasis of the contentious politics programme is on what it is that allows contention to emerge and to be sustained. At times, the language also slips into what can be done to make the acts succeed, but this is mere slippage. The demands upon today’s academics – to produce research and teaching with impact – requires that we also use a dynamic approach to the study of contention to begin to understand how to help worthy actors to make a better impact to improve the world for everyone. This would involve not retrospective tracing of mechanisms to outcomes, but forecasting, monitoring and supporting activism.

Let us now return to XR. There is no other single research programme able to help provide so many insights into the recent episodes of climate action erupting around the world as the contentious politics one. The activists’ interlocutions with the state, the sparking of counter-movements, the range of actions undertaken, the diffusion of the movement around the world and their relative success in the face of elite divisions over Brexit are all adequately covered. The main reservation I have in applying the contentious politics research programme to XR lies in my own uncertainties about where this should go methodologically and in regards to the (unintended) relatively state-centric focus of the contentious politics research programme. XR and other climate activism, to be successful, needs to resonate with individuals, groups, organisations, networks, artisans, corporations, public relations experts, local/parish councils, regional government, government ministries, national government, international governance organisations, and more at multiple levels. It also need to find a way to take on board the concerns that some have about 5G technology that should not compete with it or undermine it, but allow it to become more encompassing. Although the contentious politics programme does not preclude the targeting of multiple centres of cultural, social, and political power, it is certainly the case that the strong social movement repertoire – challenging the state in shows of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment – is too constrained to address the climate change challenge.

References


