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Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics: Introduction

Sidney Tarrow

A Strike at Siemens[1]

On the morning of April 2, 1993, a small group of labor organizers from the West German metalworker union, IG Metall, stand shivering in the dark outside a Siemens plant in the East German city of Rostock, passing out leaflets to the morning shift as it enters the plant. Siemens' West German management and other firms in the East have just tried to renege on an earlier promise to increase wages by 26 percent, claiming that they can no longer afford increased wage costs due to the disastrous conditions of the East German economy. That was the official story; but with 40 percent unemployment and massive job insecurity in the East, with no history of western-style collective bargaining, and with membership in free unions new and untested, the employers hope an aggressive united front against the union will win them reduced labor costs and more wage flexibility (Turner 1998:3).

It seems – in Lowell Turner's words – like "an employer's dream labor conflict" (p. 4). The business community and the business press urge restraint from the union, while the *Economist* titles its article on the coming conflict "Mass Suicide" (p. 3). On that chilly morning in early April, it is by no means clear that the union effort to fight the wage freeze will succeed. And the stakes are high: Should it fail, the future of social partnership and unionization are uncertain – not only in the eastern *laender* but in Germany as a whole. Union leaders have planned only a "warning strike" for this day, but no one knows how the East German workers, after sixty years of Nazism and state socialism, will react. "Listen, I don't know

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[1] This incident is summarized from Turner (1998).

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what will happen. I only know that we have our backs to the wall and have to fight," says Manfred Muster, a West German IG Metall leader who has come over from Bremen to head the strike effort (p. 5). The stage seems set for a "heroic defeat" (Golden 1997).

Political scientist Lowell Turner, who was there, later recalls what it was like on that cold April morning:

Since this was a Friday, the plan was for everyone to walk off the job, march downtown for a rally at the shipyards, and then take the rest of the weekend off . . . A strong showing would bolster the union position heading into a full-fledged strike, as well as increase the likelihood of a favorable settlement. A weak showing would cut the ground from under the union position. (p. 6)

As daylight rises and the Siemens works councillors mill about uneasily, union leader Muster jumps onto a van, circles the building in it, and turns on the loudspeaker. "This is IG Metall speaking," he says. "Today we are going out on a warning strike. 11:00 A.M. This is our right under Article 9 of the Constitution" (p. 7). Faces appear from behind the curtains of the offices. He drives around to the other side of the building and repeats the message. More faces at the windows. But by 10:45, writes Turner, "the lawn in front of the building was still empty except for a few anxious works councillors." When two squad cars approach, Munster cheerfully greets the police officers who emerge as "colleagues" who have "arrived to join the warning strike and escort us into town" (p. 8).

"And then," recalls Turner, "something quite surprising happened." At 11:00 A.M., as punctual as the German trains, the white- and blue-collar employees of Siemens streamed out through the main door. There were twenty, then fifty, then a hundred, two hundred, and still the numbers grew. . . . Along the route, small crowds from several other workplaces waited to join the march. . . . An IG Metal youth group joined at the front of the march with a wide red banner calling for wage solidarity East and West. . . . Columns approached from other directions, the workers had already spilled out from the shipyards, and there they were, about five thousand eastern workers . . . milling around in the crisp sunshine in front of a lashed-together stage, participating together in this history-making event: the first legally sanctioned collective bargaining work stoppage in eastern Germany since 1933. (p. 8)

The April 2 "warning strikes" were only the opening salvo in a cycle of work actions and negotiations that would spread across East Germany in erratic progression through April and early May, bringing into the conflict workers from other eastern regions, other manufacturers' groups and the government, and western workers in solidarity with their eastern com-

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rades (pp. 9–10). On May 12, 400,000 workers demonstrate throughout Germany in support of the eastern workers; on May 14, another 50,000 eastern metalworkers go out on strike (p. 10).

Mediated by *land* Prime Minister Biedenkopf, on May 14, a settlement is reached in the state of Saxony. This leads to agreements throughout the East. Though the union is forced to compromise on the timetable for the 26 percent wage increase, it wins a symbolic victory when the commitment is briefly reinstated retroactive to April 1. But much more important, the offensive against unionization has been stopped, East–West union solidarity is established in the face of western diffidence toward *Ossie* reliability, and Germany's system of social partnership is firmly extended to the East (pp. 15–16).

Silence and Voice

We have begun our collection of essays on silence and voice in contentious politics with the story of the successful warning strike in East Germany for several reasons:

First, though far from a typical site of capitalist contention (ex-Socialist East Germany had been merged with the German Federal Republic for less than three years), and not even a "social movement" in the classical sense, the story echoes a number of familiar themes from the "voice" of western social movement literature;

But, second, the story cannot be fully understood with the inherited tools of western social movement theory alone – there are some major "silences" in that body of theory;

Not only that: third, the typical recourse of social movement scholars who cannot explain a case with their existing toolkit – to trade it in for a new one – will help us even less. Familiar voice and muted silences need to be combined to provide a theoretically driven and empirically satisfying account. Let us briefly sketch what the Siemens story tells us:

- *Familiar Voices:* The unions in the story – like social movement organizations elsewhere – employed their organizational resources to attract followers and confront opponents. They offered strike funds, brought in experienced organizers, and took advantage of institutional opportunities – like Article 9 of the West German constitution – seeking the intervention of sympathetic, or at least neutral political forces like the Prime Minister of Saxony. The incident

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evokes familiar voices from the canon of western social movement theory.

- *Loud Silences:* But these familiar aspects of social movement mobilization as developed in the West since the 1960s will not take us far enough. For a start – in focusing on movement *actions* – it too often excludes the crucial *inter*action between actors and their antagonists. And in focusing on opportunities, the existing canon too easily ignores both the threat to the unions and the leadership strategies of unionists who either take advantage of opportunities or risk missing the boat. Moreover, in its preoccupation with resources, the traditional canon too often ignores the key factor that brings frightened and uncertain people into the street – their emotions. "Worker mobilization in this case was fueled by extraordinary passion," writes Turner of the April 2 strike (p. 14). Agency, emotion, and interaction have for too long been muted in social movement theory.

- *Combining Voice and Silence:* Nor can we explain the outcome of the successful 1993 strike wave in East Germany by substituting such "new" elements for familiar ones. For example, although union organizer Munster exercised leadership skills – a muted voice in existing social movement theory – when he greeted approaching police officers in a friendly manner, his gesture would have meant little had he been facing the police of the ex-German Democratic Republic. Also, had he lacked IG Metall's resources – well-known refrains in social movement research, his efforts would have been stillborn. And had the passion of the angry East German workers not been channeled by the organizational routines refined by the union over decades of strike practice, it might have led to violence and defeat or been buried in internal resentment. We need to find ways of filling the silences, but also combining them with familiar voices in social movement theory to provide a rounded account of so fleeting an incident as the strike at Siemens.

That is the goal of this volume.

Dead Silences: What We Will Not Do

Let us begin with what will *not* be claimed here. At first, when planning the volume, we thought mainly in terms of "silent concepts" – that is, areas of research in which scholars of contentious politics have been completely

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mute. But so rich and varied has been the development of this field since the 1960s that one would be hard-pressed to find subjects that have not been studied by some scholar somewhere or themes that have not been broached in doing so. Following to the emergence of a new wave of movements since the 1960s, scholars turned to the concepts of the resources, opportunities, frames, and repertoires of contention, drawing on organizational sociology, political science, social psychology, and history. Impressed with the conceptual richness of this field of study, we quickly climbed down from the idea of constructing a new and better social movement mousetrap.

Nor did we find that the field has been overly focused on single types of movements. Take, for example, the range of movements that have been studied in the United States: From the Civil Rights, New Left, student, and antiwar movements of the 1960s, scholars moved in the 1970s into the study of ecological, women's, gay and lesbian rights, prochoice and prolife, and animal and disease victims' rights, before refocusing on the peace, sanctuary, and new religious right and right-wing movements of the 1980s and 1990s. Similar lists could be composed for Western Europe. The breadth of single-movement studies in both Western Europe and North America is truly impressive.

Nor do we think the field of social movement studies is methodologically impoverished – though the self-flagellation of many of its practitioners might lead one to think so. From the 1970s on, to the organizational and ideological studies that have been traditional in the field, social movement scholars have turned to survey methods, analyses of contentious events and event histories, discourse analysis, theoretically grounded historical studies, and comparative methodologies. Several rich studies of social movement methodologies are currently available and others are in progress.[2]

The current need of the field lies not in implementation but in the conceptual placement of social movements. We propose to advance toward this goal by,

> first, exploring aspects of contentious politics that have not been given sufficient attention by scholars of western social movements;
> second, employing concepts from areas of social science that have not been prominent in social movement studies;

[2] Among others, see Diani and Eyerman 1992; Rucht, Koopmans, and Neidhardt 1998; and Klandermans and Staggenborg forthcoming.

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and, third, attempting to integrate or confront these new aspects and concepts with those that have shown their worth by stimulating empirical research or producing new theoretical insights in social movement theory over the past two decades.

For example, to the inherited canon of research findings on "opportunity structure," Jack Goldstone and Charles Tilly add an often-lacking and complementary focus on threat. To the canonical emphasis on the instrumentality of protest, Aminzade and McAdam will counterpose an increased emphasis on emotions. To the largely secular focus of most social movement research in the West, Aminzade and Perry will add an examination of religion and religious motives for contention. To the prevailing organizational definition of movement resources, Aminzade, Goldstone, and Perry will join the importance of leadership. Temporality – a dimension of contention that has mainly been limited to the study of "cycles" in the movement literature – is the subject of McAdam and Sewell's chapter on "temporality." Orthogonally, Sewell will explore the dimensions of spatiality and scale that are often ignored in – but are seldom absent from – contentious politics. Finally, Goldstone and McAdam will attempt to bring together a microfocus on the life course with a macrofocus on demographic change surrounding episodes of contentious politics. In his conclusions, McAdam will summarize four areas in which we hope to have made a synthetic contribution to the study of contentious politics and social movements. Let us begin with the connections between these two key terms.

Bridging Silences: From Social Movements to Contentious Politics

In one sense, our effort *will* attempt to break new ground – or at least to fill in gaps of what other groups of scholars have already etched: Social movement research has too often been cut off from the study of other forms of contention. Like the IG Metall union in the story that opens this chapter, many subjects in contentious politics do not reduce to classical social movement organizations. The same is largely true of revolutions, ethnic conflict, nationalism, democratization, and war (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001). In recent years, scholars specializing in these forms of contention have made substantial advances in describing and explaining each of them. But on the whole, they have paid little attention to each other's discoveries.

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We think the study of all these areas of conflict will profit from being examined within the common framework of what we call "contentious politics," which we see as broader than social movements but narrower than all of politics. Three of us have defined contentious politics elsewhere as:

public, collective, episodic interactions among makers of claims when a) at least some of the interaction adopts noninstitutional forms, b) at least one government is a claimant, an object or claims, or a party to the claims, and c) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants.[3]

Thus defined, contentious politics sometimes overlaps with a regime's *prescribed* forms of political participation (for example, military service and payment of taxes), often falls into the area of political expression *tolerated* by the regime (for example, electoral campaigns and pamphleteering), and under specifiable circumstances adopts forms of action (for example, assassination and armed rebellion) the regime *forbids*. Prescribed, tolerated, and forbidden identify three modes of governmental connection with the forms of public politics. Collective making of conflicting claims identifies the special territory of contention within the broader zone of public politics. We focus mainly on transgressive contention, first because this is where most of the attention of scholars lies, and second, because it has had the most impact on social and political change.

Some readers may object that *all* politics are contentious, and to some degree, they would be correct. But much of politics is ceremonial or routine; or is processed in the internal relations among the same claimants, or is authoritatively authorized. The contentious politics that interests us is episodic rather than routine; occurs in the interactions between makers of claims and their opponents; affects or potentially affects the interests of at least one of the claimants; and brings government in as a mediator, target, or claimant. We see social movements as a particularly crystallized, sustained set of interactions between challengers and authorities around long-standing claims and identities – but they are not the only ones.

We use focused, structured comparisons between and within various types of polities to search out the common mechanisms and processes that are nested within different environmental conditions. For example, in

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[3] For the development of this definition and the "political process model" it grows out of, see McAdam 1982; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Tarrow 1998b; and Tilly 1995b. For a stimulating critique, see Goodwin and Jasper 1998.

examining religious phenomena, Aminzade and Perry will not only contrast the secular/religious division of western societies with the imbrication of religion and secular politics that they find in many nonwestern ones; they contrast politicized religion in Africa with sacralized politics in China. In comparing temporality in France and the United States, McAdam and Sewell find both commonalities and differences between revolutionary time and social movement time. In turning to the role of space in contentious politics, Sewell shows its relevance to social movements, guerilla organizations, and revolutionary mobilization alike.

Through these and other observations, we aim at studying how similar mechanisms concatenate differently in different kinds of contention in different social and historical settings. While we cannot reach into all important areas of contention – for example, industrial conflict or ethnic nationalism will be missing from these accounts – we hope that broadening our focus from social movements to other forms of contention and from western to nonwestern polities will stimulate others to go beyond the social movement canon and cross these bridges too.

Hearing Different Voices

In addition to broadening the range of forms of contention we examine, we have also striven to mine veins of social scientific research that are poorly represented in the study of social movements. Paradigms are variable-finding devices; but by the same token, they are sometimes scholarship-blinding ones. While we are unsympathetic to the view that each new variable uncovered allows the scholars who find it to dismiss the research of the last wave of scholarship, several areas of research suggest examining dimensions of contention that have been poorly explored in social movement research in the past.

Consider emotion: No sensible social movement scholar would exclude emotion from the repertoire of factors that induce ordinary people to pour into the streets, risking danger or arrest from opponents or the forces of order. But the emotions of participants in contentious politics have too often been reduced to stylized feelings of solidarity or collective identity. The feelings that bring people into the streets, cause them to face superior forces, and link them to people they hardly know and may never see again are various, elusive, and often empowering. As Aminzade and McAdam write in their contribution,

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The uncertainty that characterizes contentious politics serves both to generate heightened fears and hopes regarding the future . . . *and* to render the normative . . . behavioral routines that normally structure social life increasingly irrelevant.

In their chapter, Aminzade and McAdam mine the literature on the sociology of emotions as a source of hypotheses and insights to help them suggest ways in which emotionality can be analyzed in the context of contentious politics.

The sociology of religion is another area that offers fruitful intersections with the study of contentious politics. Since Max Weber, social scientists have intuited that some kinds of authority are "charismatic." Following Weber, David Apter explored the concept of "political religion" (1960). Anthropologists like David Kertzer have examined how religious ritual informs contention and provides sources of nonrational authority for insurgent movements (1988). But until recently, the sociology of religion has remained largely distinct from the study of contentious politics.

In their contribution, Aminzade and Perry draw from African and Chinese materials to show how the intersection of religion and contentious politics assumes quite different consequences in the two areas – and different again from "the church–state separation and attendant freedoms of religion that are taken as hallmarks of liberal democratic politics". They go beyond the role of religious organizations in the mobilization of various movements to "ways in which the cultural dimensions of religion inform secular claims-making." Though focusing on two major nonwestern areas, their explorations may help to encourage the reexamination of the relations between religiosity and the supposedly secularized political systems of the West.

Research on the life course has made significant strides in sociology and human development in recent years. While students of movements were traditionally interested in the importance of generational factors in triggering the emergence of new movements (Heberle 1951), it is only in the last decade that they have moved sufficiently beyond the time-compass of particular movements to examine the effects of social movements on the life course. But even these studies exaggerated by oversampling on the life courses of veterans of particular movements or movement families; they seldom specified how movement cycles could influence the life course of broader publics. In their contribution to this volume, Goldstone and McAdam make just such an effort.

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All of these chapters will attempt to bring voices from other sectors of the social sciences into the concert of social movement research.

Variations on Themes

In addition to accessing areas of research new to the study of contentious politics like emotion, religion, and the life course, we will try to transfer insights from one area of contentious politics into others. We begin with the hunch that robust analogies exist between mechanisms and processes in one setting or form of contention and others. We do not conclude from this that identical results will follow; we think that mechanisms interact with environmental factors and with other mechanisms to produce markedly different outcomes.[4]

For example, revolutionary leaders' personalities, their ideologies, and their strategies are part of the familiar stock-in-trade of revolutionary studies. But in the social movement field, leadership skills, predispositions, and outcomes have been submerged beneath organizational and opportunity factors. In their chapter on leadership, Aminzade, Goldstone, and Perry attempt to bring leadership factors into the study of contentious politics in general.

Like leadership, temporality is a concept that has been employed in some areas of contentious politics research but less so in others. For Crane Brinton, each major revolution goes through detectable and near-identical stages (1965). But there are long-term change processes through which largely anonymous social trends are transformed into profound transformations in patterns of contention. McAdam and Sewell do not deny that these cyclical and long-term change patterns are important in the dynamics of contention; but they propose paying attention to two additional forms of temporality: the influence of single events and of cultural epochs on contentious politics. Of the opinion that "sociologically oriented analysts of social movements and revolutions have left events to historians," McAdam and Sewell see events as "unique happenings, full of accident, contingency, and sudden, unexpected transformations." Their chapter focuses on the importance of particular events like the fall of the Bastille in July 1789 and its impact on both subsequent events in the French Revolution and on the very meaning of the concept of revolution.

[4] This argument is elaborated in McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001.

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