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978-1-107-00702-4 - Violence, Nonviolence, and the Palestinian National Movement

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Excerpt

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I

The Organizational Mediation Theory of Protest

April 1936: Palestine erupts in revolt. For years, the indigenous Arabs of Palestine have engaged in pressure politics. Their goal is to convince Great Britain to abandon its support for the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine. After a decade of such protest fails to bear fruit, however, Palestinian Arabs launch a rebellion. The “Great Revolt” begins with broad-based participation in unarmed activities such as a general strike, popular demonstrations, and boycotts. Sporadic armed attacks become more frequent as rural bands carry out sniping and sabotage. The rebellion enters a hiatus and then becomes more dramatically and exclusively violent when it resumes in the fall of 1937. Rebel bands battle with British troops, and thousands die before the rebellion collapses into internecine fighting.

March 1988: The first Intifada against Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip is in its third month. For weeks on end, Palestinian youths clash with Israeli troops by throwing stones, blocking roads, burning tires, and defying curfew. Each day registers acts of nonviolent protest, including sit-ins, boycotts, commercial strikes, refusal to pay taxes, mass resignation from Israeli institutions, and the organization of community-based alternatives. Women lead huge demonstrations on International Women’s Day. On “Land Day,” an annual protest against land confiscation, Palestinians inside Israel march in solidarity with the occupied territories. Tens of thousands of Palestinians have been arrested, injured, or killed. Nonetheless, their use of lethal violence against Israel remains very limited.

March 2002: A second Intifada is in its second year. With violence claiming the lives of 246 Palestinians and 113 Israelis, the month is among the bloodiest in the history of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Palestinian activists open fire on Israeli civilians, infiltrate settlements, detonate bombs at bus stops, fire makeshift rockets, and set off a roadside bomb that destroys an Israeli tank. Israel’s repression of Palestinians is likewise violent and severe. On March 27, a suicide bombing, the 37th of the Intifada, leaves scores dead and wounded at a Passover dinner. The Israeli army responds with a sweeping and bloody

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

operation whereby it reoccupies most West Bank towns. That day, an 18-year-old girl becomes the youngest Palestinian female suicide bomber.

Why do social and insurgent movements employ the strategies and tactics that they do? Focusing on the vexing problem of political violence, scholars have produced theories about the targets, timing, and intensity of a group's use of arms. Yet as the history of the Palestinian national movement demonstrates, violence is only one form of protest and contention. The question of why movements use violent means, therefore, is inextricable from the question of why they do or do not use *nonviolent* means. This book takes up this query. I argue that while the paths to violence are multiple, there is one prevailing path to nonviolent protest: a path that requires a movement to have or create internal cohesion. When a movement is cohesive, it enjoys the organizational power to mobilize mass participation, enforce strategic discipline, and contain disruptive dissent. In consequence, cohesion increases the possibility that a movement will use nonviolent protest. Inversely, when a movement is fragmented, it lacks the leadership, institutions, and collective purpose to coordinate and constrain its members. Its very internal structure thus generates incentives and opportunities that increase the likelihood that it will use violence.

This argument is straightforward, yet its implications pose a challenge to existing analyses. Scholars and commentators propose a plethora of explanations for a movement's conflict behavior, from religious values to access to weapons, and from the escalatory effect of state repression to stark calculations of what is needed for success. My emphasis on movement cohesion and fragmentation suggests that there is no simple one-to-one correlation between any of these factors and movement protest. Rather, their influence is mediated by a movement's internal structure. Movements are not machines, propelled automatically by instrumental calculations, ideology, or all-powerful elites. Nor are they akin to billiard balls, pushed in one direction or another by external impetuses or pressures. There are instead distinctly internal and organizational reasons for their strategic choices.

I call my analytical approach the "organizational mediation theory of protest." While this approach can shed light on a variety of movements for social and political change, I apply it here to self-determination movements. Struggles of ethnic or national groups for autonomy or independence are among the world's most common sources of bloody conflict. Yet most self-determination movements are not violent. Of the 132 self-determination movements active as of 2006, only 18 engaged in armed hostilities.¹ Even movements that do engage in violence do not do so consistently over time. Of the 71 self-determination movements that waged armed struggle at some point since the 1950s, more than half no longer rely on violent strategies.²

The need to understand the conditions under which protest is violent or nonviolent is pressing for scholars and policy makers alike. There is perhaps no better case with which to explore this puzzle than the Palestinian national movement. Many find it difficult to explain Palestinians' strategies, including those who sympathize with their goals. Witnessing lethal attacks, some

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Organizational Mediation Theory of Protest*

3

wonder why there is no “Palestinian Gandhi.” They suggest that nonviolent means might better help Palestinians win international sympathy or convince Israelis that painful concessions would not diminish their security. This book suggests why these questions are off the mark. Launching nonviolent protest is not simply a matter of leadership or utilitarian calculations. A movement’s organizational structure is itself sufficient to make unarmed methods highly improbable, regardless of other impetuses or motives for such a course.

The Palestinian case is anomalous in many respects, such as its diasporic dispersal, complex interpenetrations by Middle East regional politics, and attraction of vast attention from across the world. Compounding this is the particular intractability of the conflict between Israeli and Palestinian claims to a nation-state in the same land. Given its peculiarities, much of the research on comparative conflict processes does not address the Israeli–Palestinian situation. At the same time, the literature specifically on this case tends to fall in the realms of journalism, history, and policy analysis more than in that of the social sciences. These tendencies forfeit valuable opportunities to scrutinize the Palestinian experience for generalizable insight.

While the larger circumstances of the Palestinian national movement are exceptional, many of the dynamics shaping its protest behavior are not. Palestinians share with other social and self-determination movements two basic challenges: overcoming multiple sources of internal division in order to mobilize collective action and choosing among available strategies for challenging a status quo. Many scholars of Palestinian politics are sensitive to the link between internal divisions, on the one hand, and strategy, on the other. Nearly all note that this relationship has inhibited the success of Palestinians’ struggle.³ Yet none to date have systematically theorized and analyzed its effect on their very *forms* of struggle. In undertaking that task, I seek to make a unique contribution to understandings of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, while also countering treatment of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict as categorically unique. To further this end, I also show how patterns in Palestinian history can help us understand the South African antiapartheid struggle and Northern Ireland republican movement and how these movements can in turn elucidate the Palestinian experience.

LIMITS OF CONVENTIONAL EXPLANATIONS

Protest is the act of challenging, resisting, or making demands upon authorities or power holders.⁴ Violent protest entails the exertion of physical force for the purpose of damaging, abusing, killing, or destroying. Nonviolent protest does not entail physical force. Gene Sharp identifies three kinds of nonviolent action: acts of protest and persuasion, such as marches or the display of signs and slogans; noncooperation, such as strikes and boycotts; and nonviolent intervention, such as sit-ins, hunger strikes, and other deliberate refusals to observe law or social custom.⁵ As analysts look across cases, these criteria can help them categorize protest as either violent or nonviolent. The application

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

of these criteria, however, demands attention to context. For movements that espouse armed struggle, a shift toward stone throwing represents a decrease in the violent character of protest. For movements committed to electoral politics, the opposite is the case.

Movements rarely use violent or nonviolent protest to the complete exclusion of the other. Yet what explains the relative prominence or intensity of either in a movement's repertoire of contention? Scholarship on social movements has shed light on the conditions under which people overcome problems of collective action to launch sustained challenges to authority. While an earlier generation of thinkers attributed collective behavior to systemic strains and psychological discontent, the resource mobilization approach emphasized the role of external allies and funds in enabling activists to form organizations. The political process approach then redirected attention to the shifting environmental conditions that generate "political opportunity structures" conducive to direct action. Such shifts produce social movements when aggrieved groups mobilize through networks and organizations and adopt frames that inspire and legitimate such mobilization.⁶ Recent work criticizes political process models for being overly structural and ignoring the creativity and emotion entailed in collective protest.⁷ The sum of this research offers an important foundation for any study of protest. Nevertheless, its diverse strands tend to debate the sources of movements' emergence more than the strategies that movements undertake.⁸ Some critics attribute this oversight to scholars' view of protest as a mechanical outcome of conflict between states and challengers rather than a puzzle in its own right.⁹

Nonetheless, existing research on social movements and other forms of contentious politics points to a range of possible explanations why movements engage in violent or nonviolent protest. One perspective holds that protest is a strategy that movements choose instrumentally in interaction with the adversary from which they seek concessions.¹⁰ According to this view, states' exclusion of certain groups or issues from conventional processes of decision making pushes people to disrupt the system through dissent.¹¹ The basic asymmetry of institutional and material power leads movements to seek any leverage against ruling authorities. Some turn to nonviolent protest to deny governments the obedience and compliance on which their rule depends.¹² Others embrace violence on the rationale that only stiff costs can compel states to make concessions. In this context, some analysts believe terrorism to be a rational "weapon of the weak" because it gives groups an impact far larger than their small size or resource endowment.¹³ Empirical findings suggest that terrorism has also proved effective, particularly in coercing democracies to relinquish territory.¹⁴

Turning from state structures to state policies, other research considers the particular effect of repression on the likelihood that protest will be violent or nonviolent. Many case studies demonstrate that repression generates individual-level motivations and group-level pressures that radicalize rebellion.¹⁵ Nevertheless, comparative findings are inconclusive,¹⁶ which suggests

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Organizational Mediation Theory of Protest*

5

that it is variations in the application of repression that trigger variation in protest. Some research finds that indiscriminate repression drives movements from nonviolent to violent protest; when protestors perceive that they are punished regardless of whether their strategies are moderate or radical, they opt for that which inflicts higher costs on their opponent.¹⁷ A similar dynamic ensues when regimes respond to nonviolent protest with coercion rather than concessions, after which rational rebels conclude that nonviolence is ineffective and a stronger course of action is necessary.¹⁸ Inconsistent repression can have the same effect, insofar as it sends a signal that the regime is weak and vacillating. For protestors, therefore, tactical escalation can appear to be the coup de grâce that snatches victory.¹⁹

These arguments show that protest is the outcome of a dynamic process of rational action, reaction, and anticipation. Nevertheless, the strategic interaction paradigm does not explain why movements sometimes take steps that are suboptimal or even haphazard. Nor does it tell us why they continue with a strategy after it fails to bear fruit. Reflecting that critique, an alternative approach holds that a movement's repertoire of protest is not simply instrumental, but shaped by culture, religion, ideology, or the nonrationalistic "shared understandings" that bring a group together.²⁰ According to this view, movements that reject nonviolent forms of protest may be driven by ideas and identities that render militancy a value in and of itself. Such arguments are particularly prevalent with regard to Middle East cases, as some suggest that there is something in Islam or Arab culture that disposes people to violence. Along these lines, one commentator attributes suicide bombings to "the thirst for vengeance, the desire for religious purity, the longing for earthly glory and eternal salvation."²¹ Others agree that a "culture of martyrdom" can shape protest tactics, but argue that this is a culture of despair among victims of protracted violence who only then become perpetrators.²²

These explanations remind us that values and beliefs mold collective behavior in ways irreducible to mechanical computations of effectiveness. Yet these claims are often ad hoc. Most cultures are sufficiently rich and complex to legitimate either violent or nonviolent protest. Furthermore, culture per se cannot explain why a single population might engage in different kinds of protest at different points of time. Toward a better account, another line of ideational explanation shifts focus to dynamic processes of framing. Framing is the creative endeavor by which entrepreneurs construct ideas and representations that inspire people to take part in collective action.²³ In this regard, many emphasize the role of movement elites in convincing their communities to engage in one or another kind of protest. Works on the history of nonviolent protest often stress the centrality of leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., who toiled to frame their struggles in ways that persuaded others of the value of unarmed means of resistance and social change.²⁴ Along similar lines, leaders can also invoke shared values and beliefs in ways that promote violent collective action. A large body of research on ethnic and nationalist conflict examines how leaders incite their populations

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Wendy Pearlman

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Violence, Nonviolence, and the Palestinian National Movement*

to arms, often in a self-interested bid to outsmart opponents, distract attention from political ills, or otherwise preserve their grip on power.²⁵

Arguments emphasizing elites highlight the role of agency and contingent choice in shaping forms of protest. Nevertheless, in implying a direct link between particular leaders and collective behavior, they neglect how contentious politics unleashes social processes beyond the control of any single individual. Recasting protest as such a process, other scholars propose that movement tactics evolve in stages that form a predictable “protest cycle.” Sidney Tarrow argues that movements gain pace in an initial mobilization phase, during which early risers escalate tactics, new actors come to the fore, and novel repertoires of framing and contention diffuse.²⁶ As the costs of protest accumulate, crowds withdraw in exhaustion and a demobilization phase ensues. At that point, the government often selectively accommodates the demands of movement moderates while repressing those of radicals. The outcome is sporadic acts of militant violence amid a general decline in mass mobilization.

The protest cycle model reminds us that the use of violent or nonviolent protest cannot be divorced from fluctuations in movement momentum, which evolve organically over time.²⁷ Nevertheless, cyclical formulations are more useful as description than explanation. Furthermore, Tarrow’s observation that movements split when they demobilize generates as many questions as answers. Do rifts among movement members percolate only during the decline of protest, or can they occur at its outset or upsurge? After all, as Mark Lichbach writes, “Competition, not cooperation, is the norm among dissident organizations.”²⁸ Casting a spotlight on this competition, a growing trend in research on insurgency focuses on intra-group influences on inter-group hostilities. Various studies demonstrate how rivalries within a single identity group can feed motivations for violence against an external adversary. Research on ethnic politics has long upheld the argument that vying camps intensify their demands to “outbid” each other for popular support.²⁹ In the context of insurgencies, the same dynamic goads movement factions to escalate violence against the state.³⁰ Intra-group competition takes on other dimensions when moderate insurgents enter into peace processes. In that context, their more radical rivals often act as “spoilers” who initiate attacks to undermine negotiations.³¹ In civil wars, these and other intra-group contests can develop into a complex web. A multiplicity of overlapping interests and identities belie the notion that civil wars follow a binary cleavage between two national adversaries.³²

Several works on intra-movement influences on violence invoke the Palestinian case to illustrate their claims.³³ However, these scholars frequently bias their conclusions by truncating their empirical purview to moments of heightened violence and neglecting periods in which Palestinians engaged in nonviolent protest or little open protest at all. What was the relevance of intra-group competition during those times in which the guns were relatively silent? Existing research typically ignores this question because it takes cases

The Organizational Mediation Theory of Protest

7

characterized by both internal rivalries and external violence and asks how the former affects the latter. In failing to allow the independent and dependent variables to vary, it is unable to assess the kinds of strategic action that result when movements are less internally divided. Nor does it explain why some factionalized movements, among them the Palestinian movement, at times use unarmed protest or sustain diplomacy.

To understand how internal processes affect the prospects for either violence or nonviolence, researchers cannot assume unbridled escalatory competition among factions within a movement. Rather they must investigate the structural conditions under which those who share some collective goals are able to reconcile their differences. They can then trace the impact of such reconciliation on the contours of collective action. This approach shifts analytical focus from activists' rival preferences to the ways in which movements as a whole are organized. A movement will always have members with more "radical" or "moderate" leanings. The question is how the system of relationships internal to a movement variably constrains or unleashes their ability to pursue those inclinations unilaterally. The dynamics of outbidding and spoilers are less analytically valuable as complete theories of conflict than as two of many possible mechanisms through which different levels of movement cohesion shape protest. Building on this view, the organizational mediation theory of protest takes as its starting assumption what scholars of conflict increasingly posit as their conclusion: movement members interact with both an external power and others in their own community. The puzzle is not whether a movement is engaged in two-level games. It is how the structure of those games, and with them forms of movement protest, vary over time.

The organizational mediation theory of protest is not the first to focus on the relationship between a movement's internal structure and its external strategy. Charles Tilly, for example, discusses how the organization of a population shapes its repertoire of collective action. Yet he invokes this relationship mainly to differentiate types of groups such as religious confraternities or trade unions.³⁴ He does not consider variation in internal organization within any single kind of group, such as movements for self-determination. By contrast, Jeremy Weinstein focuses on rebellions and contrasts groups in which people participate due to commitment to the cause with groups organized around material incentives. It is in the latter that fighters are most prone to engage in looting, indiscriminate force, and violence against civilians.³⁵ This distinction calls attention to the effect of organization on patterns of insurgent violence. Yet it leaves us to wonder how organization shapes the very turn to violence, as opposed to nonviolent protest, in the first place.

COHESION AND FRAGMENTATION

Existing scholarship thus identifies a plethora of variables that affect protest. The organizational mediation theory of protest is not a monocausal theory intended to replace these mono- or multicausal theories. It is a new approach

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

that focuses on how the factors that we typically think of as driving protest are filtered through a movement's internal dynamics. Their effects cannot be understood in isolation from the matrix of conflict or cooperation among movement members. Movements sharing the same emotional push toward violence or facing the same rational payoff for nonviolent protest will be more or less likely to use these strategies depending on their organizational structure.

In the context of this study, organizational structure refers to the system of relationships and rules that integrate members of a movement for the pursuit of collective aims. While various dimensions of organizational structure merit attention, one key characteristic is the degree to which that structure is cohesive or fragmented. Political scientists invoke the term "fragmentation" to gauge divisions in a polity or political system. Fragmentation thus typically refers to the distribution of seats in a legislature, the total veto points in a policy-making process, or the number of ethnolinguistic groups within certain geographical borders.³⁶ Scholars measure these kinds of fragmentation through a count of relevant subunits, adjusted for size or salience. Such measures have the benefit of replicable quantification. However, they offer a thin view of the diversity of objectives or dispersion of authority within a collective. They focus attention on the number of fragments within a unit at the expense of larger questions about the character of their interaction, the controls on their behavior, the compatibility of their preferences, and the formal and informal rules according to which power is distributed among them.

These issues are pertinent to movements for self-determination. Many movements are made up of multiple and fluid subgroups that bargain over strategy, ideology, institutions, and resources. These nonstate groups face some of the same burdens of states, such as creating social order and centralizing decision making. Yet they lack the powers of states, namely a successful claim of monopoly on the legitimate use of violence within a given territory.³⁷ The combination of domination vis-à-vis citizens and sovereignty vis-à-vis strangers enables states to regulate political fragmentation within their borders. In non-state entities, however, fragmentation takes on different dimensions. Standard indexes of fragmentation do not capture this complexity because they imply premises, such as binding laws or deep-seated ascriptive divisions, which do not apply. Furthermore, these indexes assume that identified subunits are coherent and stable. In movements and insurgencies, however, political factions often splinter, proliferate, merge, and splinter again.

Sources of fragmentation in self-determination movements are numerous, shaped by context, and concurrent at various levels of population. In developing an instrument for assessing fragmentation, it is therefore less helpful to enumerate and measure all sources of division than to identify the means by which movements achieve some degree of unity, despite the many pressures working against it. This logic is similar to the argument that fragmentation in political party systems is not inherent in particular types of social cleavage as much as it is produced by the ways that institutions manage those cleavages.³⁸

The Organizational Mediation Theory of Protest

9

I extend this insight to a new conceptualization of movement cohesion. Here it is useful to consider the definition of cohesion used in the natural sciences. In geology, physics, and chemistry, cohesion is the attraction by which the elements of a body coalesce into extended states.³⁹ Those who study cohesion in these contexts do not count composite units, but examine the origins and manifestations of forces that cause or oppose their attraction. In crafting the organizational mediation theory of protest, I adapt this notion to the social world. I define cohesion as the cooperation among individuals that enables unified action. As with atoms or molecules, cohesion results when the forces assisting cooperative behavior exceed the forces encouraging competitive or antagonistic behavior. It is the capacity for internal command and control that enables a composite social actor to act as if it were a unitary one.

The difficulty of building a cohesive organizational structure is attributable to the multiplicity of potential equilibriums when people bargain on many policy issues simultaneously.⁴⁰ In such contexts, no *ex ante* collective choice is equally desirable to all.⁴¹ Decision making by composite political entities, be they congressional committees or social movements, is thus fundamentally different than decision making by individuals. For a movement, the task of choosing a protest strategy is not simply a matter of ranking preferred outcomes, recognizing constraints, and selecting the most efficacious option. Strategy cannot be automatically derived from the logic of purposeful interaction with an external adversary. Instead, it is produced through a process of internal bargaining, compromise, and coercion.

The implication is that scholars must be wary of reifying composite actors, be they political parties, firms, states, or nonstate entities. Gary Cox and Kenneth Shepsle explain, “We know these collectives are not unitary on the one hand, and that adding up the heterogeneous tastes comprising their memberships is problematical on the other ... ‘it’ is not really an it.”⁴² I conceptualize a movement’s cohesion as the degree to which it, which is not actually an “it,” acts as if it were. Fragmentation is the degree to which it does not. I assess a movement’s level of cohesion or fragmentation by qualitatively measuring factors that facilitate cooperation among individuals and enable unified action. Three factors are particularly important: leadership, institutions, and the population’s sense of collective purpose.

Leadership, as defined by John Gardner, is the “the process of persuasion and example by which an individual (or leadership team) induces a group to pursue objectives.”⁴³ I assess leadership by assessing if a movement has one unified leadership body rather than several. I also gauge the extent to which that leadership is perceived by movement adherents as legitimate. Leadership contributes to a cohesive organizational structure by clarifying goals and inspiring people to cooperate for their achievement. In game-theoretic terms, leaders are “agenda setters” who use political skill and artistry to influence people’s preferences. They thereby produce collective choice equilibriums where they might not otherwise occur.⁴⁴ This function of leadership comes to the fore in critical choices made at particular turning points. For example,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

leaders' decision to suppress unruly dissent at a decisive juncture can send a powerful warning to other would-be rebels and consolidate the decision-making authority of the political center. On the flip side, a decision to excuse insubordination or bow to external intervention can embolden and empower rebellious forces. With time, a central leadership may find itself increasingly unable to impose its will. The crucial nature of these decisions is not always evident at the time. One testimony of leadership is the ability to anticipate them and act in ways that bolster cohesion over the long term.

Institutions are the structures and norms that govern social interaction. They are the "rules of the game" that pattern behavior for both individuals and groups.⁴⁵ Adapting Samuel Huntington's criteria for institutionalization, I evaluate the strength of institutions according to the extent to which they acquire value and stability by becoming increasingly adaptable, complex, autonomous, and coherent.⁴⁶ Institutions undergird a cohesive organizational structure. In William Riker's terminology, they systematically include or exclude certain opinions or values from decision-making processes and thereby give rise to collective choices that are more than "random embodiments of peoples' tastes."⁴⁷ Institutional design can create compromise and order even in populations divided by diverse preferences. Institutions are particularly critical in producing inter-elite and interfactional cooperation. When internal rivals submit to the same set of political rules, they accept limits to the pursuit of their ambitions and ideal outcomes. They thereby surrender some autonomy and forge a basis for collective action.

Finally, collective purpose is the extent to which a population agrees on clear objectives, that agreement crosses social, economic, and other cleavages, and commitment to those objectives is strong. Collective purpose is the ultimate guarantor of a movement's cohesion because it guarantees the movement itself. The effect of collective purpose in creating movement cohesion may be a top-down process. Leaders can explicitly invoke ideas that resonate with people's shared identities and interests, and thereby bolster unity in the struggle for goals that they hold in common. In doing so, they can leverage popular backing to isolate and thwart rivals, which may consolidate their authority and control. By contrast, collective purpose can generate movement cohesion from the bottom up. To the degree that rival groups seek popularity, society's sense of collective purpose shapes the incentives and constraints under which those groups operate. A collective purpose among the population can thus compel bickering factions to resolve their differences. In the face of a general consensus on goals and means, activists stray from public opinion at their political peril. When the population lacks a collective mission, however, the political arena can become a free-for-all in which any actor pursues private interests with no loss of public support.

As empirical indicators, leadership, institutions, and collective purpose shape each other in complex ways. Agreement among adherents of a movement can compel an ambivalent leadership to champion a clear collective purpose. Institutions can synchronize behavior in the absence of popular