

1

Claims as Performances

In London, magazines, newspapers, and pamphlets proliferated during the middle decades of the 18th century. For an increasingly literate urban population, they mixed together vital visions of world affairs, national politics, news of high society, and everyday events. The *Gentleman's Magazine*, edited by "Sylvanus Urban, Gent.," began publication in 1731. Among other features, each monthly issue of the magazine contained a miscellaneous chronicle of events likely to interest its cosmopolitan readers. The events often concerned contacts of ordinary people – workers and others who had no particular connections to power at a national scale – with genuine wielders of power.

For Monday the 9th of May, 1768, the chronicle reported these items from the London streets:

A numerous body of watermen assembled before the mansion house, and laid their complaint before the lord-mayor, who advised them, to appoint proper persons to draw up a petition to parliament, which his lordship promised them he would present; upon which they gave him three huzzas and went quietly home.

The same night a large mob of another kind assembled before the mansion-house, carrying a gallows with a boot hanging to it, and a red cap; but on some of the ringleaders being secured by the peace-officers, the rest dispersed.

This day the hatters *struck*, and refused to work till their wages are raised.

What should 21st-century readers make of these 18th-century reports? Today's readers need some essential background. In London, a great port, the watermen – dock workers and boatmen who serviced ships on the Thames – worked within easy walking distance of the City of London's center. The Lord Mayor of London maintained his headquarters in Mansion House, not far from the Thames' docks.

The year 1768 brought political turmoil to London: sailors, watermen, and other workers made repeated demands on their employers and on public authorities, as many people opposed the British crown's repressive policies in the American colonies vocally. Meanwhile, the rakish aristocratic demagogue John Wilkes returned from exile, went to prison, won multiple parliamentary elections while incarcerated, received repeated rebuffs from Parliament itself, and gained wide popular support as a speaker for popular liberties.

What about the three events of May 9th? In the first, a large delegation of watermen asked the Lord Mayor to support their demands for higher wages. He agreed to communicate a properly drafted humble petition to Parliament. The assembled workers closed with the three cheers that today have become a mere cliché but then signified *viva voce* approval of a person or an action. (Three loud groans in chorus then signified collective disapproval.)

The second event takes more glossing. The crowd was acting out its opposition to the king's Scottish advisor Lord Bute, who was leading the crown's repressive policies in England and America; it mimed the execution of Bute, using a Scotch bonnet and a punning boot as a stand-in for the advisor. John Wilkes's supporters, who included silk weavers from nearby Spitalfields, often vented their disapproval of royal authorities in just such street theater.

In the third, the *Gentleman's Magazine's* description of the hatters' action italicized the word "struck." The term was a generalization taken from sailors' striking of sails on ships they refused to man until the masters met their demands for better wages and working conditions. Only later did the word "strike" come to cover any collective withdrawal of labor from an enterprise or a craft. In their time, all three events broadcast familiar, comprehensible themes. In all three, ordinary people made claims on holders of power. They staged contentious performances. But they did so in three very different ways.

Jump forward two-thirds of a century. On the 28th of January 1834, London's metropolitan newspaper the *Morning Chronicle* carried the following advertisement in the name of the Central Anti-Corn Law Society:

ABOLITION OF THE CORN LAWS. – A PUBLIC MEETING will be held at the Crown and Anchor Tavern, Strand, on Friday next, January 31, at Twelve at Noon, for the purpose of deciding on the most efficient Means of obtaining a Removal of the Bread Tax Grievance. Colonel Perronet Thompson will take the Chair at One o'clock precisely.

Since 1797, the Corn Laws had imposed a tariff on imported grain up to a high level of British prices, thereby protecting the sellers and imposing higher prices on the buyers of grain or bread. An 1828 revision had set a sliding scale, but retained the tariff. Opponents called it the Bread Tax. According to the *Morning Chronicle* of February 1st, participants in the meeting expressed disappointment that no lords or members of Parliament had shown up.

After speeches, the meeting approved a petition to Parliament including this passage:

That your Petitioners believe and are firmly convinced, by the exercise of such experience and judgment as in their several occupations and modes of life they have acquired, that the limitation of industry and employment produced by the Corn Laws is the great cause of the National Distress, and of the sufferings and dangers incurred by the different classes of the community.

That your Petitioners have seen no instance in history of the numerous classes in any nation submitting to sufferings approaching in manner and degree to those endured by the people of this country, after the cause and nature of their evils had become familiarly known to them; and that it is consequently highly desirable to the lovers of peace and order of society, among whom your Petitioners are, that measures should be taken for effecting the inevitable change, with the least disturbance to the general quiet of the community.

The obsequious second paragraph conveyed a veiled threat: inattention to the people's needs might foster a revolution like those that had recently overturned the governments of France and Belgium. The petition did go to Parliament, but missed its mark by far. Not until a dozen years later, in 1846, did the Anti-Corn Law League reach its goal of free trade in grain. But throughout all that time, opponents of the Bread Tax continued to meet, debate, petition, lobby, and make statements to the press.

As compared with the events of 1768, notice three features of the 1834 Crown and Anchor gathering. First, it took the form of an indoor public meeting, with prior announcement, elected chair, parliamentary procedure, and cheers for statements the audience approved. Second, unlike the Lord Mayor's mediation for watermen in 1768, its leaders communicated directly with Parliament. Third, it ended (as everyone expected) with voted approval of a petition subsequently signed by many of the participants.

Four handpicked events from London can't establish the general pattern of change in such public events for the whole country between the 1760s and the 1830s. As we will see in detail later, over the two-thirds of a

century between them, decorous public meetings in the Anti-Corn Law style became much more prevalent in Great Britain. During the 18th century patrons and other intermediaries regularly stood between ordinary people and national authorities, as in the Lord Mayor's offer to pass on the watermen's petition. During the 19th century, however, popular communication with Britain's rulers, especially Parliament and its members, became much more common. Direct action against moral and political offenders, whether violent or nonviolent, gave way to meetings, demonstrations, and other nonviolent expressions of collective disapproval. On the way from the 18th to the 19th century, Britons were creating many forms of collective voice that we 21st-century political observers still notice in relatively democratic countries.

Nevertheless, some things remained the same. Both in 1768 and in 1834, Londoners were engaging in collective performances that contemporaries then found familiar. Newspapers and magazines took the existence of such events more or less for granted. They didn't ask, "What in the world are these ordinary people doing?" They asked chiefly who took part, over what issues, and how. The two gatherings at Mansion House, the hatters' strike, and the Anti-Corn Law meeting all voiced collective claims on people or institutions outside the number of those who gathered to make the claims. The fact that the claims bore on someone else's interests (rather than simply blowing off steam) made them contentious. Whether addressing government officials directly or drawing in governments as third parties, they also involved political power. The events of 1768 and 1834 belong to contentious politics.

Our four vignettes from London raise profound, unresolved questions about contentious politics in Britain and at large. Within Britain, why did the claim makers use these particular ways of voicing collective claims rather than others that would have been technically possible, such as suicide bombing or armed insurrection? Over the period from 1768 to 1834, how and why did the standard ways of making collective claims change so decisively? More generally, what accounts for variation and change in the forms of collective claim making wherever it occurs?

As a general answer, this book treats collective contention as a product of learned and historically grounded performances. In a given time and place, people learn a limited number of claim-making performances, then mostly stick with those performances when the time to make claims arrives. Contentious performances change incrementally as a result of accumulating experience and external constraints. But in the short run

they strongly limit the choices available to would-be makers of claims. In some settings, suicide bombing or armed insurrection look like two of the major options. Not so in 18th- and 19th-century Great Britain. This book asks why and how that is the case.

The book also has a methodological lesson to teach. Many historians and social scientists think they must make sharp choices between quantitative and qualitative methods, between formal analysis and literary storytelling, between narrowly conceived pursuit of explanations and broadly conceived interpretations. On one side, epidemiology; on the other side, narrative. The materials and methods of this book identify a middle ground where logical rigor meets the nuances of human interaction. It shows how the stories in which most reports of contention come packaged – including the stories from London in 1768 and 1834 – lend themselves to systematic description and analysis. Before plunging too deeply into method, however, we should clarify the subject matter: contentious politics.

Contentious Politics

Although we can obviously identify differences, the four British events converged in many ways. What did they have in common? They all made claims on other people, used public performances to do so, drew on inherited forms of collective action and invented new ones, forged alliances with influential members of their respective political regimes, took advantage of existing political regime opportunities, and helped create new opportunities to advance their claims. They engaged in contentious politics.

Contentious politics involves interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else's interests, in which governments appear either as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties. Contentious politics thus brings together three familiar features of social life: contention, collective action, and politics.

Contention involves making claims that bear on someone else's interests. Claims run from negative to positive. People make claims with such words as condemn, oppose, resist, demand, beseech, support, and reward. They also make claims with actions such as attacking, expelling, defacing, cursing, cheering, throwing flowers, singing songs, and carrying heroes on their shoulders. In everyday life, contention ranges from small matters like which football team we should support to bigger questions

such as whether grandpa rightly divided his inheritance among us, his heirs. But it also takes place in chess matches, competition among retail stores, and struggles of defense lawyers with presiding judges.

In the simplest version of contention, one party makes claims on another. The parties are often persons, but one or the other can also be a group or even an institution; you can make a claim on your boss, or file a claim on the government for worker's compensation. In the elementary version, we can think of one party as a subject (the maker of a claim) and the other as an object (the receiver of a claim). Claims always involve at least one subject reaching visibly toward at least one object. You (subject) ask your sister (object) to pay back the money she borrowed from you yesterday. But claims range from timid requests to strident demands to direct attacks, just so long as they would, if realized, somehow affect the object's well-being, the object's interests. Often three or more parties are involved, as when you demand that your sister pay you back the money she was about to hand over to a friend. Contention always brings together subjects, objects, and claims.

Collective action means coordinating efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs. Baseball teams engage in collective action, but so do choirs, neighborhood associations, and neighbors who track down a child molester. When you go to church or take a job selling hamburgers in a fast-food emporium, you enter an organization that is carrying on collective action. But most of the collective action involved occurs with no significant contention and no government involvement. The bulk of collective action takes place outside of contentious politics.

Most contention also occurs outside of politics. We enter the realm of politics when we interact with agents of governments, either dealing with them directly or engaging in activities bearing on governmental rights, regulations, and interests. Politics likewise ranges from fairly routine matters such as applying for a driver's license to momentous questions such as whether the country should go to war. But most of politics involves little or no contention. Most of the time, people register for benefits, answer census takers, cash government checks, or show their passports to immigration officers without making significant claims on other people.

The presence or absence of governments in collective contention makes a difference for three big reasons. First, people who control governments gain advantages over people who don't. Even where the government is weak, controlling it gives you the means of collecting taxes, distributing

resources, and regulating other people's behavior. As a result, political contention puts at risk, however slightly, the advantages of those who currently enjoy governmental power.

Second, governments always make rules governing collective contention: who can make what collective claims, by what means, with what outcomes. Even weak governments have some influence over the prevailing forms of claim making, and they resist anyone else who attempts to build up competitive centers of power within their territories.

Third, governments control substantial coercive means: armies, police forces, courts, prisons, and the like. The availability of governmental coercion gives an edge to political contention that rarely exists outside of the political arena. In political contention, large-scale violence always remains a possibility, however faint. Contention connected to governments does resemble contention in families, sports, churches, and businesses in some regards. This book sometimes calls attention to those parallels. But it singles out government-connected contention because of these distinctive political properties.

Let me rule out a possible misunderstanding at once. Restriction of contentious politics to claim making that somehow involves governments by no means implies that governments must figure as the makers or receivers of contentious claims. On the contrary, as the book proceeds we will encounter a wide range of contention in which non-governmental actors confront each other and make claims on religious, economic, ethnic, or other non-governmental holders of power. In 1768, the watermen first directed their claims against dockside employers, and only then asked government officials to intervene in their dispute. The minimum government involvement consists of monitoring and regulating public contention, and preparing to step in if the claim making gets unruly.

Here is another possible misunderstanding. Many people use the term "social movement" broadly to cover all sorts of struggle, from intellectual currents to rural rebellions. But, as we will soon see, as it grew up in western countries the social movement actually brought together a very limited range of claim-making performances: creation of special-purpose associations, public meetings, petition drives, street demonstrations, and a few more. It specifically excluded most varieties of armed attack as well as a wide variety of nonviolent actions, such as shaming ceremonies and magical rituals. The distinction matters. One of this book's main aims is to show how different sorts of performance, including social movement performances, vary and change.

Episodes, Performances, and Repertoires

Astute social movement analyst Francesca Polletta points out that movement participants often describe major episodes as products of spontaneous inspiration: “It was like a fever.” That description contradicts the testimony of both veteran organizers and close students of particular movements. Both of them stress the social connections and organizing efforts that go into any effective collective action. The background includes life experiences of individual participants, but it also includes their social locations. Polletta adds that the cultural milieu provides languages and symbols through which participants and observers make sense of the collective action. Speaking of the American civil rights movement, Polletta remarks:

To account for the emergence of a mobilizing identity on black college campuses and the development of such identities more broadly, we need to examine not only the instrumental framing efforts of established groups and movement organizations but also the larger cultural context in which an idiom of student activism made sense. Then we need to capture the diffuse, non-institutionalized discursive processes through which a rationale for protest, or a set of rationales, gained currency. (Polletta 2006: 37)

The civil rights movement, then, did not consist simply of spontaneous actions by heroic individuals. It involved life experiences, deliberate organizing, and concerted episodes of claim making.

Any close observer of contentious politics witnesses a continuous stream of interaction. Whether gathering with like-minded people or not, participants in claim making not only make publicly visible collective claims on other people but also recruit like-minded folks to their cause, plan their strategies in private, and dig up information that will help them. In many cases, they engage in other activities that likewise advance their cause: contribute money and time to help fellow members, wear badges or colors advertising their affiliation, sell polemical books or pamphlets, argue with opponents they meet at work, and more.

In some broad sense, all these activities belong to contentious politics. Yet we won’t get far in explaining the variation and change of contentious politics without making preliminary distinctions among three classes of activity: 1) routine social life, 2) contention-connected social interaction and 3) public participation in collective making of claims. Students of social movements and of other forms of contentious politics therefore face a serious question: where should we draw the line between what we are explaining and what explains it?

For some purposes, we will treat 2) and 3) as what we are trying to explain, and change and variation in 1) as part of the explanation. If, for example, we are examining the contentious politics of American feminism over the last half-century, we are quite likely to pinpoint consciousness-raising women's groups – a clear case of contention-connected social interaction, but not usually of public activity – as something to explain along with public collective claim making such as street marches and petition drives (Beckwith 2001, Katzenstein 1998, Whittier 1995). We will then treat change and variation in routine social life such as employment, education, child-raising, and household economic activity as partial causes of change and variation in organized feminism. In this sort of analysis, the stream of contentious politics we are trying to explain includes both contention-connected social interaction and public participation in claim making. Call this a thick object of explanation.

Suppose, on the other hand, that we are trying to explain how the march on Washington became such a powerful way to promote an American cause (Barber 2002, Hall 2007). We thus single out a thin object of explanation. Then we will do better to treat changes in the first and second elements – routine social life and contention-connected social interaction – as causes of change in the third: public participation in the making of claims. On Saturday, 27 January 2007, for example, participants in a Washington Mall demonstration against the Iraq War included not only “tens of thousands of protesters” from across the United States but also political leaders and such celebrities as Jane Fonda, Susan Sarandon, and Tim Robbins (Urbina 2007).

A full explanation of participation in the January 2007 Washington march would locate the demonstrators in everyday American life (the first element above), but it would also concern the second element: who recruited participants and how. In such cases, the stream of contention we are trying to explain includes all marches on Washington. We may also want to compare that stream with other streams, including marches on state capitals, street marches in general, and delegations to Washington that do not engage in street marches. Or we might undertake international comparisons. In Great Britain, for example, the march on London has a history running back hundreds of years (Reiss 2007a). The stream of contentious politics we are then explaining still consists of public participation in collective making of claims, and the explanations still concern routine social life and contention-connected social interaction.

Similarly, analysts of strikes typically make strong distinctions between strike episodes as such and what happens in work settings that generate – or, for that matter, fail to generate – strikes. Where they draw lines between episodes and contexts significantly affects the inferences they can draw about causal mechanisms and processes. In the broad view, change and variation in contention-connected interaction become part of what analysts are explaining. In the narrower view, both routine social life and contention-connected interaction become part of the explanation for public, collective making of claims. This book generally takes the narrower view. It singles out thin objects of explanation. It identifies a thin object of explanation, but strives to get it right.

In either case, we will usually get a better grip on the cause-effect dynamics involved by cutting the big streams into episodes: bounded sequences of continuous interaction, usually produced by an investigator chopping up longer streams of contention into segments for purposes of systematic observation, comparison, and explanation. Let us say we already know what stream of contention we want to explain, and whether it contains a thick or a thin object of explanation. How to identify episodes still remains a knotty conceptual and theoretical problem. Analysts face hard choices among three very different approaches to delineating episodes:

1. Trying to reconstruct what participants in contention experience as a single episode, for example, by taking self-reports of staged events or campaigns as units of observation
2. Adopting conventions that already appear in reporting media, for example, what newspapers count as riots or police count as encounters with rioters
3. Letting observed interactions and their interruptions delimit episodes, for example, by regrouping available accounts into one-day segments of interaction

Each has its advocates, its advantages, and its obvious limitations. But the choice among them does not depend on common sense or convenience so much as on conflicting conceptions of what analysts are actually studying. Each implies a somewhat different line of explanation for contentious politics.

In the first alternative, the actors' consciousness becomes central; analysts often think of their topic as something like "protest" or "resistance." In that case, analysts might find interesting how participants