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PART ONE

What's the Problem?

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What Are They Shouting About?

“On thinking of the events that have happened since the beginning of the week,” confided Parisian bookseller Siméon-Prosper Hardy to his journal on July 17, 1789, “it is hard to recover from one’s astonishment” (BN Fr 6687 [Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Fonds Français, no. 6687]). It had, indeed, been quite a week in Paris; that week’s pages of Hardy’s neatly penned journal contain extraordinarily vivid portraits of contentious politics. No such tumults had shaken Paris since the Fronde of 1648–1653. From the time when the Third Estate’s representatives to the Estates General in Versailles declared themselves a national assembly on June 17, detachments of royal troops had been gathering around the Paris region. On several occasions, however, whole companies had refused to use their arms against civilians or had even joined in popular attacks on troops that remained loyal to the king. By early July, signs of great division were appearing within the regime.

When the king dismissed popular finance minister Jacques Necker on July 11, mass marches and gatherings began to overflow Parisian streets. That night people sacked tollgates on the city’s perimeter, then danced around the ruins. During the next few days, electoral assemblies, their provisional committees, and their hastily formed militias began running much of Paris. Meanwhile, bands of Parisians broke into prisons and other public buildings, freeing prisoners, seizing arms, and taking away provender stored within.

On the 14th of July, searches for weapons continued. According to Hardy’s account:

People went to the castle of the Bastille to call the governor, the marquis Delanay, to hand over the weapons and ammunition he had; on his refusal, workers of

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the faubourg St. Antoine tried to besiege the castle. First the governor had his men fire on the people all along the rue St. Antoine, while making a white flag first appear and then disappear, as if he meant to give in, but increasing the fire of his cannon. On the side of the two drawbridges that open onto the first courtyard, having pretended to accept the call for arms, he had the gate of the small drawbridge opened and let in a number of the people who were there. But when the gate was closed and the drawbridge raised, he had everyone in the courtyard shot, including three of the city's electors . . . who had come to bargain with him. Then the civic militia, indignant over such barbarous treatment of fellow citizens, and backed by grenadiers of the French guard . . . accomplished the capture of the castle in less than three hours. [BN Fr 6687; for a more detailed and accurate account, see Godechot 1965]

During that day Parisians killed not only the Bastille's governor but also the Arsenal's powder-keeper, two veterans of the Invalides who had fired on invaders there, and the chairman of the city's Permanent Committee. Over the next few days, delegations from many parts of the region, including members of the National Assembly and dissident royal troops, ceremoniously committed themselves to the Parisian cause. On the sixteenth and seventeenth, the king himself recalled Necker, withdrew troops from the region, and, on foot amid deputies and militiamen, made a symbolically charged pilgrimage to the Parisian Hôtel de Ville. The threatened king had another thirty-odd months to live, most of them as nominal head of state. Yet by July 16, 1789, France entered a long and tortuous period of contentious politics.

Contentious Politics

To call the events of 1789 "contentious politics" may seem to demean a great revolution. This book aims to demonstrate that the label "contentious politics" not only makes sense but also helps explain what happened in Paris and the rest of France during that turbulent summer. The book before you also examines the relations between two variants of contention – contained and transgressive – as they intersect in major episodes of struggle. Further, it shows how different forms of contention – social movements, revolutions, strike waves, nationalism, democratization, and more – result from similar mechanisms and processes. It wagers that we can learn more about all of them by comparing their dynamics than by looking at each on its own. Finally, it explores several combinations of mechanisms and processes with the aim of discovering recurring causal sequences of contentious politics.

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By contentious politics we mean:

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

Roughly translated, the definition refers to collective political struggle.

Of course, each term in such a definition cries out for further stipulations. The term “episodic,” for example, excludes regularly scheduled events such as votes, parliamentary elections, and associational meetings – although any such event can become a springboard for contentious politics. Again, we take “public” to exclude claim making that occurs entirely within well-bounded organizations, including churches and firms. Despite obvious parallels between some struggles occurring inside and outside these boundaries, we concentrate here on those having manifestly political ramifications.

Nevertheless, we can hear the objections: Doesn’t this definition demarcate an impossibly broad field of study? And what of politics within institutions that break out of the boundaries of their rules or make claims that challenge existing norms and expectations? Let us take up these objections in turn.

Is all of politics contentious? According to a strict reading of our definition, certainly not. Much of politics – the majority, we would guess – consists of ceremony, consultation, bureaucratic process, collection of information, registration of events, and the like. Reporting for military service, registering to vote, paying taxes, attending associational meetings, implementing policies, enforcing laws, performing administrative work, reading newspapers, asking officials for favors, and similar actions constitute the bulk of political life; they usually involve little if any collective contention. Much of politics takes place in the internal social relations of a party, bureau, faction, union, community, or interest group and involves no collective public struggle whatsoever. The *contentious* politics that concerns us is episodic rather than continuous, occurs in public, involves interaction between makers of claims and others, is recognized by those others as bearing on their interests, and brings in government as mediator, target, or claimant.

What about definitional breadth and contention within institutions? Is this subset of politics still too sprawling and amorphous to constitute a coherent field of inquiry? We are betting against that supposition. Let us

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put the matter starkly. The official inquiry and later impeachment proceedings against Richard Nixon belong within the same definitional universe as the so-called Mau Mau rebellion of Kenya in the 1950s. Both qualify, in our terms, as *episodes of contention*. Such episodes constitute the terrain of our investigations.

We do not claim that these episodes are identical, nor that they conform to a single general model. They obviously differ in a host of consequential ways. Yet we group them under the same definition for two reasons. First, the study of political contention has grown too narrow, spawning a host of distinct topical literatures – revolutions, social movements, industrial conflict, war, interest group politics, nationalism, democratization – dealing with similar phenomena by means of different vocabularies, techniques, and models. This book deliberately breaches such boundaries in a search for parallels across nominally different forms of contention. It searches for similar causal mechanisms and processes in a wide variety of struggles.

Second, we challenge the boundary between institutionalized and noninstitutionalized politics. The Nixon impeachment inquiry operated almost exclusively within legally prescribed, officially recognized processes for adjudicating such conflicts. Mau Mau did not. We recognize this difference. We will, indeed, soon use it to distinguish two broad categories of contention – contained and transgressive. But even as we employ the distinction, we insist that the study of politics has too long reified the boundary between official, prescribed politics and politics by other means. As an unfortunate consequence, analysts have neglected or misunderstood both the parallels and the interactions between the two.

Reification reached its peak in American social science during the 1950s and 1960s by creating a sharp disciplinary and conceptual distinction between conventional and unconventional politics. Political science claimed “normal” prescribed politics as its bailiwick, leaving social movements (in William Gamson’s ironic phrase) to “the social psychologist whose intellectual tools prepare him to better understand the irrational” (Gamson 1990: 133). Sociologists claimed movements as their chosen terrain, frequently ignoring their complex relations to institutional politics. Over the past thirty years, this neat disciplinary division of labor has largely dissolved. Yet we are left with a language and a set of categories (revolution, social movement, interest groups, electoral politics, and so on) reproducing the original duality.

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Boundaries between institutionalized and non-institutionalized politics are hard to draw with precision. More important, the two sorts of politics interact incessantly and involve similar causal processes. Coalitions, strategic interaction, and identity struggles occur widely in the politics of established institutions as well as in the disruptions of rebellions, strikes, and social movements. The underground war waged by Richard Nixon that resulted in the botched Watergate break-in and the resulting impeachment inquiry stemmed, in large part, from Nixon's hostility to the antiwar movement and other movements of the New Left. Similarly, Mau Mau had its origins, not in some spasm of anticolonial violence, but in a circumscribed conflict involving a set of four legally constituted political actors: Kenya's colonial authorities, British officials, Kenyan nationalists, and Kenya's white settler community. Virtually all broad social movements, revolutions, and similar phenomena grow from roots in less visible episodes of institutional contention. Excavating those roots is one of this book's central goals.

Contained and Transgressive Contention

We begin by dividing contentious politics into two broad subcategories: *contained* and *transgressive*. (We prefer this distinction to the more familiar one between "institutional" and "unconventional" politics because it allows us to emphasize transgression within institutions as well as the many routine activities of external challengers.)

Contained contention refers to those cases of contention in which all parties are previously established actors employing well established means of claim making. It consists of episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims, (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants, and (c) all parties to the conflict were previously established as constituted political actors.

Transgressive contention consists of episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims, (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the

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claimants, (c) at least some parties to the conflict are newly self-identified political actors, and/or (d) at least some parties employ innovative collective action. (Action qualifies as innovative if it incorporates claims, selects objects of claims, includes collective self-representations, and/or adopts means that are either unprecedented or forbidden within the regime in question.)

This book's cases fall overwhelmingly on the transgressive side of the line: They usually involve either formation of new political actors, innovation with respect to new political means, or both. We deploy the distinction contained/transgressive for two reasons. First, many instances of transgressive contention grow out of existing episodes of contained contention; that interaction between the established and the new deserves explicit attention. Second, substantial short-term political and social change more often emerges from transgressive than from contained contention, which tends more often to reproduce existing regimes. Or so we argue.

For the sake of clarity, this book concentrates its attention on contentious episodes involving transgressive contention. We stress sorts of contention that are sporadic rather than continuous, bring new actors into play, and/or involve innovative claim making. For further simplification, our sustained examples come chiefly from episodes in which national states were direct participants or significant parties to the claims being made. This focus on national, as opposed to local or regional, contention springs primarily from practical concerns. Episodes of national contention more often produce the requisite volume of scholarly materials than do localized events. This does not mean, however, that our alternative analytic program applies only to periods of broad national contention. Suitably modified, it also applies to local, sectoral, international, and transnational contention.

Our strategy is to examine comparatively the causal processes discernible in fifteen major episodes of contention, and component mechanisms of those processes. We illustrate our approach to mechanisms and processes in this and the next chapter with respect to three such episodes – the French Revolution, American civil rights, and the Italian protest cycle – returning to them later in the book for the sake of their relative familiarity. In Chapter 3, we describe our strategy of paired comparison more fully. For now, suffice it to say that the strategy rests on detailed analyses of multiple episodes whose primary requirements were that (a) they involved substantially different varieties of contention within significantly different sorts of regimes, (b) they lent themselves to analytically

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valuable comparisons, and (c) there exist sufficient scholarly materials to make sense of the events in question.

Let us return to the distinction between continuous and episodic processes. Public politics can involve conflicting claims but proceed within incremental processes. The controversies over slavery we examine in Chapter 6, for example, were fought out largely within congressional debates through most of their forty-year history. Conversely, well-institutionalized forms of politics are often episodic, as when the Swiss doubled their electorate in 1971 by admitting women to the vote. The combination of conflicting claims and episodic action attracts most of our attention.

We emphasize that combination not because it is the only site worthy of interest but because it often:

- creates uncertainty, hence rethinking and the search for new working identities
- reveals fault lines, hence possible realignments in the body politic
- threatens and encourages challengers to take further contentious action
- forces elites to reconsider their commitments and allegiances, and
- leaves a residue of change in repertoires of contention, institutional practices and political identities in the name of which future generations will make their claims.

What's News?

This book identifies similarities and differences, pathways and trajectories across a wide range of contentious politics – not only revolutions, but also strike waves, wars, social movements, ethnic mobilizations, democratization, and nationalism. In recent years, specialized scholars have made substantial advances in describing and explaining each of these important contentious forms. On the whole, they have paid little attention to each other's discoveries. Students of strikes, for example, rarely draw on the burgeoning literature about ethnic mobilization. Students of ethnic mobilization return the compliment by ignoring analyses of strikes. Yet strong, if partial, parallels exist between strikes and ethnic mobilization, for example in the ways that actions of third parties affect their success or failure and in the impact of previously existing interpersonal networks on their patterns of recruitment.

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Again, students of social movements, ethnic mobilization, religious conflict, worker-capitalist struggles, and nationalism have independently discovered the political salience of rituals in which adherents to one side or another publicly display symbols, numbers, commitment, and claims to disputed space. Yet these specialists hardly ever notice their neighbors' work, much less undertake systematic comparisons of rituals in different settings. A historian knowledgeably locates attacks on Muslims and Jews in the social structure of fourteenth century Aragon, for example, but draws no guidance whatsoever from anthropologists' and political scientists' contemporary studies of similar categorical violence (Nirenberg 1996; for missed parallels see, e.g., Brass 1996, Connor 1994, Daniel 1996, Roy 1994). Again, an anthropologist's richly documented study of parades and visual displays by Ulster activists draws extensively on anthropological and rhetorical theory, but quite ignores analogous performances elsewhere in the British Isles and Western Europe perceptively treated by geographers, political scientists, sociologists, and historians (Jarman 1997; for relevant studies see, e.g., Baer 1992; Brewer 1979–1980; Butsch 1995, 2000; Davis 1975; della Porta 1998; Fillieule 1997; Lindenberger 1995; Plotz 2000; Steinberg 1999).

Like many of its European counterparts, the Ulster study identifies a phenomenon that cuts across nominally different forms of politics. Observers tend to associate public displays of uniforms and other explicitly political symbols with government-prescribed politics, because of their frequent use by authorities to advertise state power. But similar displays of uniforms and symbols sometimes form crucial features of hotly fought contention. Indeed, parody of official ceremonies in forms such as hanging in effigy or coronation rituals often provides readily recognizable drama for dissidents. Under repressive regimes, authorized public ceremonies and holiday celebrations frequently provide occasions for making of claims, however fleeting, whose statement elsewhere would put the claimants at high risk to detection and punishment. Similarly protected times and spaces attract claim making over a wide variety of contention (Polletta 1999). Much of this book's effort goes into the identification of such parallels, connections, and variations.

From Polity Model to Dynamics of Contention

But that happens in later chapters. For now, we must ask how to identify actors in contentious politics, their claims, the objects of those claims, and