CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In 1997, *The Social Psychology of Protest* (Klandermans, 1997) appeared. Until then theories and approaches to collective action were scattered throughout psychological, sociological, and political science journals and volumes in Europe and the United States. *The Social Psychology of Protest* was an attempt to bring these bits and pieces together. A very successful attempt – it became a classic in the field. However, the two decades that have passed since its appearance have been vigorous decades in the field *and* in the world. One can see this volume – *Individuals in Action* – as an attempt to integrate the recent efforts and update the assessment of where we are today.

Since 1997, the world of protest has changed profoundly. Take the Internet, social media, email, and smartphones, which gave the world a virtual "stratum." In *The Social Psychology of Protest* there is *no single* reference to the Internet or social media. This would be inconceivable nowadays. Simultaneously, a new social fabric emerges, loosely coupled networks are added to the organization and structure of society, accelerated by ever renewing ICTs. Traditional "greedy" institutions such as trade unions and churches which made significant demands on members' time, loyalty, and energy (Coser, 1974) are replaced by "light" groups and associations that are loose, easy to join, and easy to leave. Despite this process of individualization people are still committed to common causes. Underlying this is what Lichterman (1996) calls "personalism": people feel a personal sense of political responsibility rather than feeling restricted or obligated to a community or group. These societal processes imply profound changes in protest dynamics that call for an update of empericism and theory.

Protest not only changed qualitatively, but also quantitatively, in such an order of magnitude that the first decade of the twenty-first century has already been baptized the era of protest. In 2011, *Times Magazine* even chose "the protestor" as the *Person of the Year*. Virtually every day news

media display streets and squares occupied by protesting crowds. Our times are contentious, indeed. Why do all these people protest? Why are people prepared to sacrifice wealth, a pleasant and carefree life, or sometimes even their lives for a common cause? These questions are not new, they have intrigued social scientists for a long time. Yet, for social and political psychologists this contentious era created renewed interest in collective action. As it happened, just after the publication of *The Social Psychology of Protest*, the social psychology of protest saw an explosive growth. This renewed interest is also meta-analytically confirmed (Van Stekelenburg, Anikina, et al., 2013; Van Zomeren et al., 2008). We certainly live in contentious times and social and political psychologists try to understand the psychological aspects of this social and political change.

Until 1997, answers to the question as to why people protest given by social and political psychology have been provided in terms of grievances and efficacy. However, the explosive growth added new concepts to the conceptual filing cabinet of social and political psychologists of protest. Identity, and later dual identity and politicized identity were, by then, new kids on the block. Furthermore, recent work in sociology and social psychology has brought emotions to the study of protest (Goodwin et al., 2001; Jasper, 1998; Van Stekelenburg, 2006; Van Zomeren et al., 2004). In our own work we proposed to consider ideology as another element, which comes into play when issues or events are against people's norms and values and people want to express their indignation (Van Stekelenburg et al., 2011). A final element added to the filing cabinet was social embeddedness (Klandermans et al., 2008). Studies published after 1997 showed that, in practice, all these concepts are clearly interwoven.

Hence, the social psychology of protest has expanded enormously – theoretically and empirically – since 1997. The general objective of this book is to synthesize these recent efforts and update the assessment of where we are. It aims to bring together insights on protest participation from different disciplines (e.g., social psychology, political psychology, sociology, political science) which approach protest participation from complementary theoretical and methodological angles. We deliberately aim to merge theory and will abundantly illustrate this with – often, but not always, our own – empirical material. This volume aspires to facilitate cross-fertilization and more comprehensive analyses of protest participation. We believe the time is ripe for such an intensified interdisciplinary exchange which eventually should lead to a more integrated approach to

the social psychology of protest. This chapter provides an overview of this volume, but first we will devote some words to the activity of interest: political protest.

1.1 What Is Political Protest?

Political protest is the expression of objection to a certain policy, political issue, or state of affairs. Protesters take part in protest events that are staged by citizens acting in concert to influence politics, to promote or prevent change. In other words, protest is a form of collective political action. In the words of Wright and colleagues (1990b, p. 995) an individual takes part in collective action "any time that [s/he] is acting as a representative of the group and the action is directed at improving the conditions of the entire group." Obviously, this is not limited to the most prototypical of all protests, namely street demonstrations, but also includes strikes, political consumerism, signing petitions, and more radical forms of protest, such as riots and political violence. This definition implies that the act of an IS suicide terrorist can be characterized as a political protest. As can making a deliberate, well-considered choice to buy a bar of fairtrade chocolate, or signing an online petition while sitting at your kitchen table (Van Deth, 2014). Although some activities are undertaken *alone*, they still constitute collective behavior – after all people undertake them as part of a group.

Furthermore, political protest is *political* behavior. Brady defines political participation as "action by ordinary citizens directed toward influencing some political outcomes" (Brady, cited in Teorell et al., 2007, p. 336). Such action can take place in the context of movement or party politics (Klandermans, 2015a). Social movements and political parties are the two prominent entities practicing politics in democratic systems. Movement politics centers on activities such as signing petitions, mass demonstrations, occupations of public sites, boycotts, donating money to a movement organization, strikes, violence against property and people, to mention the most common examples. Party politics involves activities such as voting, contacting politicians, campaigning, donating money to a political party, party membership, or running for office. Recently, virtual forms of action were added to the repertoire.

Van Deth (2014) designs a conceptual map of political participation. He observes that political participation is like an expanding universe. Ever more activities are incorporated as political participation, including activities that are in principle not political, but are transposed into a political act, because they are politically motivated (such as boycotts, buycotts, or

communal gardening). In guiding us through the conceptual forest of political behavior, Van Deth assigns different conceptualizations in use by scholars and citizens alike. Movement and party politics are described as noninstitutional and institutional or unconventional and conventional forms of political participation, respectively. In this book, *Individuals in Action*, we will mainly focus on what Van Deth labels noninstitutional political participation, contentious politics, etc. Some forms may not directly be observed as protest, take for instance civic engagement and community participation, as they may have the form of volunteering, but may be addressed to power holders as well, and can then be seen as forms of protest. We will include those in our discussion too.

We hasten to say that this does not imply that social psychology does not contribute to understanding why people take action in institutionalized political participation. To the contrary, a quick glance through the journal *Political Psychology* shows that social psychological approaches are used for voting *remain* or *leave* in the Brexit-referendum (Macdougall et al., 2020), or demand-side populism and political polarization (Erisen et al., 2021), and, yet another example, how political leadership communicates populist boundaries via Twitter and the effects on party preferences (Hameleers, 2021). To put it even stronger, social psychological theories developed to predict protest behavior, inspired work on institutionalized political participation. For example, politicized identity to predict voting (Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2015), or so-called protest votes (Otjes et al., 2020), or, as the authors themselves say, the curious case of anger in explaining voting intentions (Van Zomeren, Saguy, et al., 2018). All-in-all, this shows that social psychological approaches are employed for noninstitutionalized and institutionalized political participation, but the focus of this book will be on political protest, and thus noninstitutionalized political actions.

Political protest, as the expression of objection to a certain policy, political issue, or state of affairs, thus starts with grievances (Klandermans, 1997). In fact, in reaction to felt grievances, people might exhibit a variety of specific behaviors depending on how they perceive their situation. Wright and colleagues (1990a) proposed a simple taxonomy based on three T-junctions people might encounter while contemplating how to react (see Figure 1.1): the first is that between inaction and action; inaction, as a matter of fact, appears the most frequently chosen option. Interestingly, the focus in most literature almost always is the participant rather than the nonparticipant. Trying to understand why people take part in collective action is the aim, rather than why they fail to do so. This

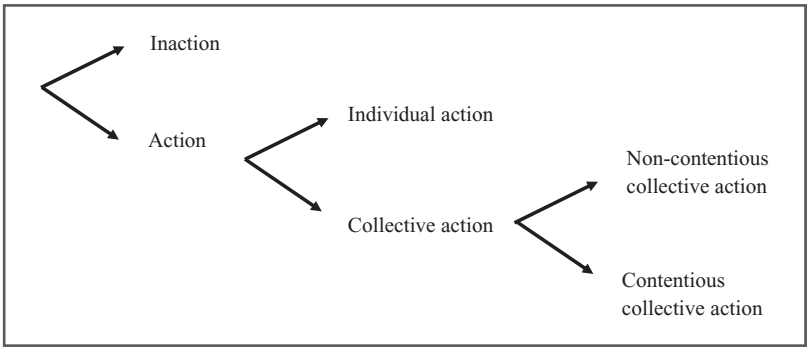

Figure 1.1 Responses to grievances

suggests that nonparticipation is simply considered the other side of participation. We maintain that, in reality, it is more complex than that and we will, therefore, provide a theoretical and empirical overview to nonparticipation in Chapter 4. The second junction is that between actions directed at improving one's personal conditions, for instance, moving to another job (individual action), and actions directed at improving the conditions of one's group (collective action). The third distinction is between noncontentious collective action, like petitioning and taking part in a peaceful demonstration, and contentious collective action, like a site occupation or civil disobedience. These distinctions are important because we may assume that the motivational dynamics underlying the different responses are different. Indeed, someone who is prepared to sign a petition might very well be unwilling to take part in a demonstration or inclined to use violence to reach his group's goals.

Engaging in social movements most of the time implies taking part in some form of collective action, and this collective action can take many different forms. Klandermans (1997) distinguished these forms of participation in terms of *duration* – ad hoc versus sustained – and *effort* – weak versus strong (see Figure 1.2). Ever since collective action has been studied this distinction has been employed. For instance (Marsh, 1977), Barnes and Kaase (1979), Klandermans (1997), and Dalton (1999) all made rankings of activities that entailed more or less costs and risks or more or less effort and resources. Some forms of participation are limited in time or of a once-only kind and involve little effort or risk – giving money, signing a petition, or taking part in a peaceful demonstration. Examples in the literature are the demonstration and petition against cruise missiles in the

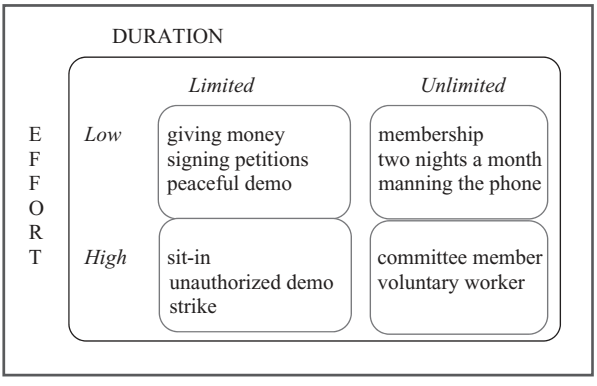

Figure 1.2 Forms of participation (*Source*: Klandermans, 1997)

Netherlands (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987; Oegema & Klandermans, 1994). Other forms of participation are also short-lived but involve considerable effort or risk – a sit-in, a site occupation, or a strike. Participation in the Mississippi Freedom Summer (McAdam, 1988) and participation in the Sanctuary movement (Nepstad & Smith, 1999) are cases in point. Participation can also be indefinite but little demanding – paying a membership fee to an organization or being on call for two nights a month. See, for an interesting comparative study, Pichardo et al. (1998), who studied a variety of such forms of participation in the environmental movement. Finally, there are forms of participation that are both enduring and taxing like being a member on a committee or a volunteer in a movement organization. Examples are the members of neighborhood committees (Oliver, 1984) and the members of underground organizations.

From a social psychological viewpoint, taxonomies of participation are relevant because one may expect different forms of participation to involve different motivational dynamics. Let us give two illustrative examples. Long-term, taxing forms of participation are typically of the kind that you need a few people for it who are willing to do the job. Once you have mobilized those few you do not really need more participants. In fact, more participants might even create coordination problems. This is typically the situation where people can and do take a free ride (Marwell & Oliver, 1993). Oliver (1984) shows that the few who do participate in these activities are usually fully aware of the fact that they are giving a free ride to most sympathizers, but it doesn't bother them. In fact, this is part

of their motivation: 'if I do not do it nobody else will do it', they reason (Oliver, 1984). Compare this to a strike. For a strike you need some minimal number of participants. If this threshold is not passed, all effort is in vain. In terms of the motivation of participants, the problem to be solved is to make people believe that the threshold will be reached. This is walking a thin line. If someone expects that few will participate, his or her motivation to take part will be low. If someone feels that many people participate, s/he may conclude that he can afford to take a free ride.

Knowing that you are giving many others a free ride or knowing that a threshold must be reached are two completely different cognitions. The two examples illustrate that different forms of participation imply different motivational dynamics. Even more obvious is the impact of costs on the choice of type of activity. Higher costs will reduce participation. Discussions of political protest must thus take into account the kind of activity we are talking about. This became obvious in a study of the protests against the cruise missiles in the Netherlands, in which Klandermans and Oegema (1987; Oegema & Klandermans, 1994) compared taking part in a street demonstration in 1983 and signing a petition in 1985. Although the proportion of sympathizers with the protest goals were more or less the same during the two campaigns, the participation figures were very different: 56 percent of our respondents intended to sign the petition and 48 percent did indeed sign, whereas 10 percent intended to take part in the demonstration and 4 percent eventually took part. Not only was the proportion of people prepared to sign a petition much higher than the proportion of people who were ready to take part in a demonstration, the vast majority of those prepared to sign ended up signing, while more than half of those who intended to take part in the demonstration eventually did not take part (6 percent). Indeed, the much more moderate, low-cost activity of signing a petition generates much less defectors than the less moderate more costly activity of participating in a demonstration. In one of the rare comparative studies of types of movement participation, Passy (2001) found indeed that the motivational dynamics of various forms of participation were different (see also Saunders, 2014; Van Stekelenburg et al., 2016). Moreover, the internet and social media have changed the collective action repertoire even further, for example, think of post-it activism and clicktivism. The underlying motivational dynamics of these digital repertoires of activism are hotly debated in the literature (e.g., Enjolras et al., 2014; Hirzalla et al., 2010; Valenzuela, 2013).

1.2 About This Volume: Individuals in Action. A Social Psychology of Protest

The central question underlying this volume is: *why do some people protest, while others don't?* We aim to merge theory and evidence on protest politics whereby individuals always figure center stage – what are their fears, hopes, and concerns? What groups do they identify with? Are they cynical about politics or do they trust their authorities? What are the choices they make, the motives they have, and the emotions they experience? Why do they decide to stay or, for that matter, radicalize or leave the movement?

In doing so, the book takes a social psychological approach to contention. It focuses on subjective variables and takes the individual as its unit of analysis. As such, it distinguishes itself from sociological and political scientific work on contention. Sociologists and political scientists typically analyze the meso- and macro level and employ structural approaches. The social psychological approach takes the micro level as a point of departure and concentrates on questions of how individuals perceive and interpret these conditions and focuses on the role of cognitive, affective, and ideational roots of contention. Yet, the decision to protest is not taken in a social vacuum. To the contrary, we firmly believe that the political power play is – by definition – fought out in the sociopolitical intergroup context, and thus that *contestation is contextualized*. This brings us to the social psychology of protest, and the focal point of this book. The first three chapters of this book are devoted to what we mean by a social psychology of protest. It will describe its epistemology, history and methods.

The second part of the book, Chapters 4–7, deals with contextualized contestation. Many studies have drawn attention to rising levels of political protest. People protest government's economic and/or political policies, corruption, stolen votes, anti-war, pro-environment, etcetera. Indeed, grievances abound, but the translation from individual grievances into collective protest isn't always easy. Klandermans (2004) decomposes the dynamics of contextualized collective action into demand, supply, and mobilization. Protest is born out of dissatisfaction, but it also needs organizers to express this dissatisfaction, and mobilization to bring this demand and supply together. This "market metaphor" functions as the roadmap of the second part of the book.

The third part of the book, Chapters 8 and 9, is devoted to the processes underlying the formation of a mobilization potential. The perspective presented in this section holds that instances of collective action are not

independent. Indeed, a fundamental fact about collective action is its cyclicity (Koopmans, 2004). Most research on protest concerns a comparison of participants and nonparticipants in a specific instance of mobilization or participation at a specific point in time – be it a demonstration, a boycott, a sit-in, a rally, a petition, or else. It raises the question of what processes underlie the formation of a mobilization potential? In the final part we will first devote attention to sustained participation and disengagement, and focus on the question "*should I stay, or should I go?*" Moreover, as protest cycles "mobilize the organized, but also organize the demobilized" (Tarrow, 1989, p. 47), we will devote our last chapter to politicization, polarization, and radicalization, all processes steering mobilization.

All in all, the book provides three unique lenses to social movement literature, namely (1) *The individual as unit of analysis*, (2) *Contextualization of contestation*, and (3) *The individual aftermath of contention*. Next, we will elaborate each of them.

1.3 The Individual as Unit of Analysis

Protests are collective actions in which citizens are mobilized to challenge powerholders, authorities, or the whole society to redress social problems or grievances and restore critical social values. Of course, in democratic societies citizens can influence politics through elections. But what about the period between elections? What are citizens to do if they want to influence politics during those years? Moreover, political decision-makers are not the only addressees, indeed, not all protests are anti-government, but also against firms, organizations, society at large, etcetera. A brief look at the political past and present suffices to conclude that, in all democracies, citizens engage in all kinds of noninstitutional action with the objective to influence politics or to express their views – some contentious, others expressive; some individual, other collective; some political, others apolitical. In fact, protest is one of our most important democratic rights. And these actions have achieved many results. But the road to success for social movements is complex, sometimes risky, and usually lasts many years. Indeed, protesting – especially sustained protest – isn't easy. Why, then, are people prepared to sacrifice wealth, a pleasant and carefree life, or sometimes even their lives for a common cause? This question brings us to the social psychology of protest, and the focal point of this book.

The book opens with the epistemology, history, and methods of the social psychology of protest. In doing so, it will delineate the reasons and consequences of taking the individual as a unit of analysis. This

methodological point of departure reflects the attention given to the social construction of reality as a filter between contextual conditions and individual actions. Such an approach highlights the fact that all social phenomena – social structures and social causal properties – depend ultimately on facts about individuals and their social relationships. An assertion of a structure or process at the macrosocial level must be supplemented by account of how it is that ordinary citizens, situated in specified circumstances, come to act in ways that produce, reproduce, or take action against the societal structures or institutions. As social psychology explores the causes of the thoughts, feelings, and actions of people – and primarily how these are influenced by sociopolitical context – it is well-versed to do so. People – social psychologists never tire of asserting us – live in a perceived world. They respond to the world as they perceive and interpret it and if we want to understand their cognitions, motivations, and emotions we need to know their perceived and interpreted reality. A social psychological approach highlights the point that all social facts – social structures and social causal properties – depend ultimately on individual or shared perceptions of the surrounding reality. So, in order to make assertions about the causal properties of governments or civil societies, for example, how political opportunity structures affect levels of protest, we need to arrive at an analysis of the social construction of reality as a filter between sociopolitical conditions and individual action patterns.

Key to our methodological starting-point is that social outcomes need to be explained in terms of individual cognitions, emotions, and behavior; their (in)formal and virtual relationships; and their actions. However, it is important to recognize that the basic building blocks of social explanations are not mutually independent actions performed by atomistic individuals. Rather, individuals' actions are typically oriented toward others, and their relations to others therefore are central when it comes to protest. So, our account also identifies the social environments through which action is structured, planned, and projected: the social (and virtual) circles, its incentive systems, the organizations people are embedded in, and the systems of rules and laws (e.g., is demonstrating illegal or legal?).

We firmly believe that context plays a major role, be it the sociopolitical context, or embeddedness in (in)formal and nowadays virtual networks. Social embeddedness – the quantity and types of relationships with others – is the linking pin between individual and society. It can be formal relationships as in party membership or being a member of the labor union, informal relationships, such as friends, family colleagues, and virtual relationships such as active participation in blogs, social