

Purpose and Passion in Collective Action  
Hofstra, 2007

I'd like to start by thanking the organizers,  
who've put together a terrific program.  
I'm delighted so many people are willing  
to talk about, and think about, strategic issues.

For years, activists have asked me  
what social science they should read.  
I'm sure you've been asked this, too.  
It's always an embarrassing question,  
Since there's so little to recommend.  
Mostly I would send them to Alinsky,  
although when I eventually reread Alinsky  
I realized even it was mostly vague bromides.

And yet, fifteen years ago,  
when I started trying to write about strategy,  
social movement scholars said,  
We already know about that: go read  
Gamson, and Piven and Cloward.  
Well these are very good books,  
but they only deal with a tiny part of strategy,  
Mostly, do disruption and violence work?

Or they'd mention Chuck Tilly's work on repertoires  
(although for some reason it's always repertoire,  
as though only the French have repertoires),  
But there the point is why protestors have so few choices to make.

It's not helpful to say to an activist,  
You have to wait for windows of opportunity to open,  
You have to stick to the accepted repertory.

Despite a surge of work on decisionmaking in other fields,  
There's still nothing close to a sociology of decisions,  
Or more broadly, a sociology of strategy.

It apparently goes against the structural intuition  
at the heart of our discipline.  
So for too long,  
We've allowed game theory to monopolize  
the language and thinking of strategy studies.

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By strategy I mean simply

a situation in which individuals or groups  
try to get others to do what they want them to –  
whether or not it's against the others' will.

I emphasize this because,  
in fact, a large part of strategy is changing others' desires,  
persuasion as well as coercion:  
in other words we may PRE-EMPT resistance.

Words, force, and money  
are the three major means in strategic action,  
and they work in very different ways.  
But different social sciences tend to adopt  
One of them as an exemplar for all of them—  
Misrepresenting the others in the process.

In a way, if political science is about coercion,  
And economics traditionally about money,  
Then sociology SHOULD be the discipline for persuasion.

Strategy permeates the things we study,  
but we're forever freezing it into structure.  
Most good sociologists have plenty of strategy in their work,  
if they pay any attention at all to the world around them,  
but we have no language for talking about it directly,  
no way to pull scattered insights together into focus,  
or to allow them to cumulate.

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So what should we aim for?  
Our approach to strategy has to be interactive,  
which means it has to include expectations,  
which means it has to be psychological and cultural,  
which has to include emotions.

We need to look at the interplay  
between players' projects and the constraints facing them,  
These constraints aren't always or even primarily structural,  
in fact most of the time so-called structural constraints  
actually hide other players,  
enforcing or reinterpreting the rules,  
building up resources and alliances,  
and actively trying to foil other players.  
Structures don't do anything by themselves  
--which is why it's a misleading metaphor.

Our approach to strategy also has to be interactional:  
players engage one another,

they anticipate; they react.  
Game theorists know this,  
and even exaggerate the degree of anticipation.

But what game theorists are less good at,  
is all the shared understandings,  
the loyalties, the affective ties,  
the normative satisfactions  
that shape both means and ends.

So any serious synthetic effort today  
has to be cultural and interpretive,  
to recognize humans as thinking, feeling, caring actors,  
with a rich variety of ends AND means,  
and at least capable of rationality  
even when they don't develop that capacity much.  
But rationality in a much broader sense  
than the rational choice folks define it.

But in reacting against the economic model,  
we don't want to end up with an oversocialized conception,  
as sociology tends to do.

Players are not defined by their immediate social settings;  
they take projects with them from setting to setting,  
they create new settings to pursue their ends,  
they interpret and rework settings,  
and most of all, they dupe others into thinking,  
this is one kind of situation,  
when it's really a different kind of situation.

They're not always trying to attain communicative agreement,  
Even though they ARE trying to have an effect on others,  
but sometimes by MIScommunication, by deception.

Which is another important aspect of a sociology of strategy:  
players are audiences for each others words and actions.  
They're not calculators, they're interpreters.  
They interpret constantly what everyone is doing –  
including their own words and actions.

Which also means that they're not only acting and talking,  
they're constantly interpreting their own actions and words for others:  
we're doing this now, we meant this,  
we're trying to accomplish that.

What people SAY they're doing is as important  
as what they're REALLY doing –

even when it's meant to HIDE the reality.

So the world of strategy is a thoroughly cultural world,  
which is something game theorists miss.

But that doesn't mean people take at face value  
what others do and say, either.

I also want to emphasize that strategy includes goals.  
We don't want to assume that players have any single motive,  
Especially one that we as observers know in advance.  
All too often, social science assumes ONE main goal  
--money or power typically –  
which gets us into huge trouble.

We then miss all the clashes between goals,  
The conflicts between individual and group goals,  
The way individuals defect,  
But also the ways they pursue  
personal goals and group goals at the same time.

Another problem is that movement scholars  
have all too often ASSUMED motivation:  
People know what they want,  
and are just waiting for a window of opportunity  
to open in order to go after it.

We need to examine which goals ARE widely shared,  
which ones CAN be assumed,  
And which are NOT,  
which ones need to be carefully constructed by organizers.

Like game theory,  
sociology needs to incorporate both individuals and collectives as players,  
but Unlike game theory,  
it has to recognize that they are not formally the same.  
Collectives are always composed of individuals,  
who can defect in all sorts of ways,  
or pursue their own goals at the same time  
they pursue the collective's goals.

It's these problems of coordination and communication,  
of collective identity and solidarity,  
where sociology especially has a lot to contribute.

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I also think a strategic approach  
Has the advantage of forcing us to stick to the micro level,

It approach has the potential to overcome  
Some crippling concepts that are disguised metaphors:

The idea of “a culture,”  
corresponding roughly to the scope of a “society,”  
or a “nation,” and a “state” (or “tribe” in anthropology),  
or even the notion of a movement,  
which is more of a call for collective identity  
than a concrete reality.

In place of such metaphors,  
I would recommend a combination of more concrete entities:  
cognitive processes, emotions, decisions, interactions.  
It is these we actually study, not “a movement.”

This grouping will also allow us to join two dimensions of social life  
long kept apart by disciplinary turf battles and intellectual tastes:  
the study of purpose (or strategy)  
and the study of culture (or meaning and passion).

Rational-choice and game theories have too long dominated strategy,  
to the exclusion of culture.  
Culturally oriented scholars, on the other hand,  
have too easily dismissed the building blocks that game theory offers:  
players, arenas, and choices.  
Humans are driven by BOTH passion AND purpose,  
and the two need to be brought together in models of social movements.

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People outside the academy  
care a lot about strategy,  
because they have to make decisions.  
And the willingness of economists and political scientists  
to address strategy is largely what's given them such influence.  
Even though most of their models of choice are,  
to a sociologist, breathtakingly naive.

People listen to the disciplines that talk about choices,  
Rather than those that address constraint or limits.

But it's about time we had something to say to them.

None of which is to say that all sociology should be about strategy,  
Or even that all strategy has to do with choices.  
But we've studied strategy as though it were all about constraint,  
And esp. constraints of a structural, unbending kind.

We need to distinguish different kinds of constraints:

There are strategic constraints, imposed by other players;  
Physical restraints imposed by resources;  
Cultural constraints imposed by our understandings,  
and those of others;  
And finally the rules of the arenas,  
which come closest to structural constraints,  
although they only operate when other players enforce them.

These work in different ways,  
But most of them involve other players' use of them in strategic ways.  
Rules and resources don't do any thing by themselves.

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So let me end with a couple examples of mechanisms  
That I think are micro, observable,  
And important to strategy.

One is from a large list of strategic dilemmas I've developed,  
The other from a list of emotional mechanisms.

There are different kinds of strategic dilemmas.  
Some are mostly internal dilemmas,  
Over how to build your team, how leaders should act,  
What they should symbolize,  
How permanent your organization should be, and so on.

Others are external dilemmas,  
Over how to have an impact on other players.

And of course there are dilemmas  
About tradeoffs between internal and external goals.

Still others are cultural dilemmas,  
About what kinds of meanings and feelings  
To encourage in different audiences,  
Or how to "characterize" players  
as villains, victims, and heroes.

Now when dilemmas are not faced explicitly,  
They are typically still there as tradeoffs,  
As choice points where something else could have been done,  
Even if, for cultural or psychological reasons,  
No one thought about the alternatives.

This is one reason that having a list of recurrent dilemmas  
Can help us as analysts see effects and possibilities  
That participants themselves might not see.

It's actually a place where we can advise activists if we want to.

As one example out of dozens,  
A central external dilemma is what I call naughty or nice:  
do you try to please those in authority,  
or do you defy them, try to disrupt things,  
break the laws and the norms?

For a lot of players on a personal level,  
do you bully others or sweet-talk them?  
For many, intimidation and disruption work.  
For others, they bring on the end of their own team.

Naughty techniques usually need  
very specific and immediate goals:  
you can intimidate a corporation into  
recognizing a union,  
or a legislature into passing a bill.

But the cost is in broader public opinion,  
if you care about that,  
or in arousing a reaction from authorities.

In other words, the short-run gain  
has to be important and relatively irreversible,  
because there is usually long-run damage to your reputation.

A lot of players have tried to work this dilemma  
by having a distinct radical flank that plays rough,  
so that the mainstream  
can distance themselves from the extreme actions  
but perhaps still benefit from them.  
The bad cop alongside the good.

But of course this just opens up a whole new field of struggle:  
CAN you keep your distance,  
or does the whole team or coalition get branded extremist?  
You have to work hard to manage public impressions.

IN a way, what a strategy of intimidation can do,  
is to split apart your opponents' coalition,  
so that individuals or organizations defect,  
because they're bearing too great a cost

But the rest of the coalition will put a lot of pressure on them,  
not to defect.

Take the antiabortion movement,  
which has scared a lot of doctors away from doing abortions;

the number who do has dropped steadily.  
The dangers, whether they are real or perceived,  
are just too high for a lot of doctors to face.  
And the pro-choice movement,  
at the same time, pressures them to keep practicing.

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Choices are obviously strategic, but what about emotions?  
I've also tried to catalogue these into different types,  
With different sources and effects.  
Some are closely connected to goals,  
Others are associated with means,  
Some are broadly mobilizing and some demobilizing.

As just one example, I want to talk about  
what I call moral emotions:  
They are mostly different from  
the immediate, reflex emotions such as anger and surprise,  
Or moods such as joy or resignation.

They are emotions of approval and disapproval,  
And as Bill Gamson pointed out long ago,  
Moral emotions are what really move people into action.

The most obvious is indignation or outrage,  
which help trigger moral shocks.

A second common moral emotion is pride in doing the right thing,  
Feeling good about participation.

Less obvious is retribution,  
The satisfaction of setting things right,  
Often at great cost.  
Retribution can be simply revenge against those who've wronged us,  
certainly one of the most common motivations in human history,  
Or it can be more abstractly a punishing of wrongdoers,  
A pride in justice.

Perhaps one of the basic dynamics of protest  
Is an interaction between negative emotions and positive:  
Between a sense of threat, outrage, fear, indignation on the one hand,  
And hope, joy, thrill on the other.

It's the contrast, the interplay  
Between the good and the bad  
That compels action, gives a sense of urgency, and so on.  
This is a kind of updating and potential specification  
of old relative deprivation models.

It's like a moral-emotional battery,  
Which by separating positive and negative charges  
gives us a shock,  
some energy that can help move us.

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These are just examples  
of the dozens or hundreds of strategic, emotional,  
cognitive, and moral mechanisms  
we can find at the micro level,  
from which we can build up to bigger explanations.

With a strategic lens we can see people doing things,  
We can better see agency AND constraints on it,  
The actions of protestors AND of other players equally  
The interactions that actually lead to various outcomes,  
Bad as well as good.

Attention to strategy at the micro level  
seems to me the most promising way  
to bring together what we already know about protest,  
to make sure it is concrete and relevant,  
and to move research forward in promising directions.

This workshop should provide just that kind of push.