

Culture and Strategy

Francesca Polletta  
University of California, Irvine

The problem for those who want to theorize the role of culture in strategy is this: how do you get at how culture limits movements' strategic options without representing activists as stupid—or mystified, blind, or somehow limited in their ability to see strategic imperatives and opportunities that analysts can see. This is not to say that activists aren't sometimes stupid, and they aren't sometimes missing vital pieces of information; and they aren't susceptible to urban myths and sacred cows. That all goes without saying—for activists just as the rest of us. But the challenge, I believe, is to get at cultural constraints that operate generally no matter how smart and savvy activists are. Although activists can overcome those constraints (just as they can overcome a deficit of funding or the demobilizing efforts of a repressive regime), often they do not, with predictable consequences.

I want to suggest three analytical strategies for getting at how culture sets the terms of strategic action. There are many more. I choose three partly because two makes it sound as if it's an either/or choice and four makes it sound as if I'm advancing a comprehensive list. Mainly, though, each of the three captures something that is easy to miss about how culture operates. So I want to say something about how we should study the formation of movement strategy but also how we should study culture more generally, inside and outside movements.

Before I do that, let me say what's wrong with how we tend to think about culture and strategy; what we have missed. When I say we, I don't mean all of us all the time. But I think we're all guilty of it some of the time. In short, we tend to see culture and strategy as opposed. Cultural commitments lead people to behave in ways that are consonant with their values. Strategic ones lead people to behave in ways that are instrumental in furthering their goals. A cultural

commitment demands that you treat everyone as equals. A commitment to political effectiveness demands that you let the people who know better make the decisions. Culture dictates that if you are nonviolent, you do not cut fences in order to enter and occupy a nuclear power plant site. Strategy dictates that you do. Activists juggle strategic commitments and cultural ones, sometimes favoring one, sometimes the other, sometimes stymied by their inability to do simultaneously what is right and what is effective.

The problem with thinking about strategy this way is that it misses, first, the fact that culture can be strategic. This is not only in the sense that culture can be used strategically, a la framing, but also that cultural commitments can have instrumental benefits. A firm commitment to egalitarianism may, under certain conditions, serve to unify the group. A preference for a kind of cool affectless rationality may legitimize the group in the eyes of some audiences.

Seeing strategy and culture as opposed also misses the fact that what counts as strategic is cultural. Let me give an example. In his sophisticated ethnographic account of the demise of the antinuclear Clamshell Alliance in the early 1980s's, Gary Downey (1986) describes a split between people in the group he calls "egalitarians," who were committed to strict consensus and people he calls "instrumentalists," who were willing to relax the requirement strict consensus in the interests of political efficacy. The two sides clashed in a debate about whether to illegally occupy the Seabrook nuclear plant. According to Downey, some Alliance members, "implicitly emphasized egalitarianism [at the expense of instrumentalism]...by arguing that a plant occupation was not successful if it did not produce a 'grassroots movement.'"

But why was galvanizing local activism seen as the expression of an egalitarian commitment rather than an instrumental one? In fact, Downey, tells us, initially it *was* not. The conflict between instrumentalists focused on stopping the construction of the Seabrook nuclear power plant and egalitarians committed first to eradicating domination within their own ranks developed over time. Aside from the fact that labeling the competing commitments as “instrumental” and “egalitarian” makes it difficult to see why galvanizing a local movement was considered at odds with an instrumental commitment (and presumably for both sides in the debate), the formulation obscures the shift through which the practices associated with an egalitarian commitment came to be seen as at odds with an instrumental one.

But here’s the tricky part. We could just describe that shift, tracing activists’ changing perceptions of what was strategic or ideological, what was a risk and what was an opportunity. We could just describe how activists construct the rational. But we want to do more: we want to explain why activists construct the rational the way they do. And why those constructions change. We want to why spurring grassroots mobilization was originally seen as strategic and came to be seen—by both sides in the debate—as ideological. Or why, to draw an example from my own work, consensus-based decisionmaking, which in the early 1960s was seen as a practical organizing strategy, is now seen as the height of ideological self-indulgence (Polletta 2005).

To better account for, rather than simply describe, the role of culture in activists’ strategic decisionmaking, I believe we need to pay fuller attention to the institutionalized *sources* of the understandings that shape activists’ strategic decisionmaking and to the observable *mechanisms* by which some options are ruled out and some ruled in. I say *institutionalized* sources because

the culture that we use most is the culture that is familiar, that is part of the way we do things, conduct relationships, talk about politics, express emotions, and so on. The culture that matters is not free-floating but rather anchored in familiar relationships, rules, and routines. I say *observable* mechanisms by which options are ruled in and ruled out to draw our attention to discursive and organizational processes and as an alternative to simply locating those mechanisms inside actors' heads.

Those are broad injunctions. Let me turn now to three analytical strategies, or better three loci of cultural constraint. Again, I focus on these three—repertoires, institutional norms, and the trope of metonymy—because they allow me to make three points about how we should study culture and strategic action, both in movements and more generally. Namely that we should resist thinking of culture as operating only at the level of microinteraction (this is why repertoires are useful); that we should resist thinking about culture only in terms of texts, rather than also rule-governed performances (this is where institutional norms are relevant); and that we should resist thinking about meaning as achieved through consistency and clarity (this is where metonymy is relevant).

### Repertoires

In any given historical period, challengers are likely to make use of a limited range of strategies, tactics, and claims. As Chuck Tilly puts it, “existing repertoires incorporate collectively-learned shared understandings concerning what forms of claim-making are possible, desirable, risky, expensive, or probable, as well as what consequences different possible forms of claim-making

are likely to produce. They greatly constrain the contentious claims political actors make on each other and on agents of the state” (1999: 419).

Tilly insists that a repertoire is not a fixed menu of options. Rather, he emphasizes the extent to which claims that are considered realistic, appropriate, and effectual are developed in the interaction of challengers and authorities. Still, the fact that we can identify coherent sets of claimsmaking routines, which differ across historical periods, and which do not include other, hypothetically possible, routines, is evidence of cultural constraint.

What stands behind those repertoires? Why does one repertoire dominate rather than another? Tilly’s answer, in the case of the emergence of a modern repertoire of protest in the nineteenth century, is that the state’s relationship to its subjects changed (1998). When the state’s war-making projects required that it extract substantial resources from its subjects, it became a target, in turn, for subjects’ demands. Protest became increasingly national, modular, and centered on electoral politics. Food riots and local skirmishes over taxation yielded to strikes and “demonstrations,” in which people massed at formal seats of governmental power with banners and signs indicating their identity and interests. The electoral rally replaced the feast day processional, the formal meeting the charivari.

One can dispute this account, of course, and/or identify other repertoire shifts in which the state does not play so central a role. And certainly, we need to know much more about how the lines between the inside and the outside of repertoires are policed (see, e.g., Conell and Voss 1990), as well as about how repertoires change (see, e.g. Steinberg 1999, and Clemens 1996; 1997). But I

do want to plump for more in this vein of macro-sociological but firmly empirical studies of culture and protest. In addition to repertoires of claimsmaking strategies, we might study how the appropriate motivations for protest have changed over time, or tease out distinctive styles of protest that animate movements operative at the same time (see, e.g., Young 2006).

### Institutional norms

A second analytical strategy for getting at cultural constraint focuses not on texts but on performances, and more specifically, on the norms of cultural performance. The argument here is that culture constrains not by limiting what people can think; they can think anything. The constraint comes in what they can say. Institutional conventions of cultural expression and evaluation—conventions that are sometimes formalized and sometimes not—shape the claims one can easily make. For example, a judge can tell a story in court; a defendant may be penalized for doing so. A plaintiff in small claims court may be encouraged to tell a personal story and then penalized nonetheless because her story does not demonstrate the clear lines of cause and effect that judges—even small claims court judges—expect (Conley and O’Barr 1990).

Routines of news reporting, courtroom interaction, fundraising appeals, and talk show performance encourage activists to present some complaints and not others; to invoke certain kinds of justifications; to display certain emotions; to present certain people as spokespersons and so on. In her study of activism by adult survivors of child abuse, Nancy Whittier (2001) found that when survivors gathered in movement conferences and at marches, speakers told stories of personal fortitude. They described fear and self-loathing yielding to grief, anger, and finally, to the strength that came from casting off shame. With titles like “Sing Loud, Sing

Proud,” and “Courageous--Always Courageous,” movement magazine articles and workshops encouraged participants to emphasize their recovery rather than the details of their abuse. When survivors appeared in court, however, they were encouraged to focus on the fear, grief, shame, and hurt produced by their abuse. These kinds of emotional performances were required, Whittier writes, in order to prove that the survivor was a victim deserving of compensation. Advice articles in movement magazines warned those going to court that the experience would be demeaning. They should be prepared to tell their stories in the ways expected of them, should avoid betraying their anger or pride, but should find outlets outside court in which to tell other parts of their story. On television talk shows, another place in which child abuse activists appeared frequently in the 1980s, survivors focused more on the abuse and its traumatizing effects than on the survivor’s eventual recovery. Accompanied by therapists, guests often cried while clutching stuffed animals or speaking in childlike voices. Whittier argues that by eliciting pity and horror in audiences, survivors’ stance on talk shows may have made it more difficult for audiences to identify with them. And by representing themselves as passive and powerless (an image reinforced by the presence of therapists), survivors may have repelled others suffering from abuse, who might have been mobilized by expressions of focused anger and stories of personal overcoming.

Certainly, one can refuse the conventions of cultural performance. Survivors could have been angry on talk shows and prideful in courtroom hearings. But doing so would have been risky. Culture shapes strategy in the sense that abiding by the rules of cultural expression yields more calculable consequences than challenging them. For example, feminists who challenged workplace discrimination in court in the 1980s were encouraged to put women on the stand who

could testify to their experience of aspiring to a higher paying but traditionally masculine job and not getting it. Now, providing a few such stories could not, on its own, demonstrate *patterns* of disparate treatment. Feminists could have refused to frame their claims in terms of individuals' experience of discrimination. But when they did, they were much more likely to lose their cases (Schultz 1990). Judges sometimes berated them for just that: a judge in the famous Sears case said they might have won if they had produced "even a handful of witnesses to testify that Sears had frustrated their childhood dreams of becoming commission sellers."

So what was wrong with having the individual women testify to their experiences of discrimination? Not only that activists had to sign on to a strategy that was fundamentally illogical. By arguing that women had the same aspirations as men, aspirations that were frustrated by sexist managers, plaintiffs left unchallenged the idea that aspirations are only shaped in childhood rather than shaped in the labor market, shaped by how a job is advertised. Why would a woman think herself eligible for a job that was presented as a man's job? That was the question that they should have been able to ask and were not able to ask.

It is hardly surprising, moreover, that conventions of cultural expression enter into activists' own tactical calculations. The animal rights activists whom Julian Groves (2001) studied discouraged women from serving in leadership positions because they believed that women were seen by the public as prone to the kind of emotionalism that would cost the movement credibility. Activists spent little time debating whether women were in fact prone to emotionalism, however, or whether emotional accounts were more or less effective than rational arguments. So their calculations were strategic but were based on gendered assumptions about reason and emotion.

The anti-Gulf war activists observed by Stephen Hart (2001) relied on a pragmatic, nuts-and-bolts style in their internal discussions, effectively ruling out of order discussions of participants' personal commitments or broad ideological visions. But that "constrained" discursive style served them less effectively than did the "expansive" discourse characteristic of faith-based organizing groups, in which participants' ethical commitments were threaded through all discussions. A discourse valued for its pragmatism, ironically, proved less effective than one valued for its moral depth.

Now, are activists dumb if they don't recognize that discussions of faith and principle build commitment to the cause? That nuts and bolts tactical discussions are boring? That emotional appeals can be effective? Not dumb, but, in some ways, risk averse. Activists have a stake in hewing to convention where it serves them and challenging it where it does not serve them. Aside from the fact that the conventional can easily seem natural, the conventional also yields predictable results. Challenging the norms of cultural expression, however necessary it may be to secure real change, is a gamble.

### Metonymy

Although I shifted in the last section from talking about cultural constraints operating "out there"—in institutional norms—to talking about how activists conceptualized those constraints in their internal discussions, I want to move now to an even more microinteractional level at which culture operates: in conversation. Observable conversational mechanisms operate to advantage some tactical options over others. In the absence of those mechanisms, we can assume,

additional options would have been available. Let me talk about one such mechanism:  
metonymy.

Metonymy is common figure of speech whereby one word or image is invoked for another. So we might refer to a decision made by “the crown” rather than the king, or describe journalists as “the press.” Often, the object used in a metonymic relation denotes a whole cluster of objects. So, when we say, “Washington is wary of recent Palestinian moves,” we do not have a single person or organization in mind but rather a cluster of organizations that together represent Washington: state department and national security officials, Congressional representatives, the President, perhaps the pundits who comment on national affairs. Metonymy is similar to metaphor in involving the substitution of one thing for another. The difference, according to standard literary theory, is that, in metonymy, the relationship between the two is conventional, already known. Kings wear robes but we don’t refer to a decision handed down by “the robe.” The use of metonymy indicates that the relationship between the two objects—the one referred to and the one or ones denoted-- has taken on the status of common sense.

What makes metonymy useful for students of movements is that its use in movement groups’ tactical decisionmaking sheds light on how cultural associations shape strategy (Polletta 2005; 2006). We know that movement groups adopt targets, tactics, and strategies not only because they have a good likelihood of being effective and because they are consistent with the group’s express ideological commitments, but also, often, because they are symbolically associated with groups who are appealing for other reasons—or are symbolically opposed to people who are unappealing.

Sometimes, groups are explicit about the role of symbolic association. For example, feminists are often self-conscious in their rejection of bureaucratic organizational forms on account of their masculinist associations. But many times the symbolic associations that shape strategic choice operate more implicitly. The emergence of metonymic structures in activists' discussions should alert us to the fact that such associations have become commonsensical. Of course, such associations can be challenged, and sometimes are. But doing so is risky. As a kind of shorthand, metonymies both assume the existence of a group for whom the shorthand makes sense and they signal membership in the group. That makes them difficult to challenge since to do so can be interpreted as a sign of one's ignorance and, possibly, one's insecure place in the group. Again, it is always possible to think outside canonical storylines and the tropes on which they rest, to imagine other stories and practical possibilities. But to articulate those alternatives is risky, whether in a Congressional hearing or in a group of like-minded activists.

Let me give a few examples. In the early years of the militant southern civil rights group, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), making decisions by consensus and rotating leadership was seen as a practical organizing tool, a way to train people for political leadership. It was also seen as a distinctively southern black strategy—contrasted to the parliamentary style characteristic of northern whites. That was the source in part of its appeal to northern white new leftists. Between 1964 and 1965, however, consensus-based, nonhierarchical decisionmaking—participatory democracy—came to be seen as impractical, ideological, and self-indulgent. This was neither because SNCC's instrumental needs changed nor because its formal ideological commitments did, two explanations that have been commonly offered. In

SNCC workers' discussions during this period, participatory democracy increasingly came to be metonymically associated with the group's programmatic morass and with the dominance in the organization of northern whites. I say metonymically associated because no one actually said how a more centralized organization would generate programmatic ideas (in fact, one could make a plausible case that a decentralized and nonhierarchical structure best promoted the individual initiative that had been the source of SNCC's best ideas) and, as I noted, a short time earlier participatory democracy had been contrasted with the decisionmaking style of northern whites. Rather, at a time when the group was both desperate for effective direction and increasingly uncomfortable with the group's white membership, organizational structure stood in for these thorny problems. People did very occasionally challenge the association of participatory democracy with programmatic paralysis on the one hand and the domination of whites on the other. They tended to be responded to in one of two ways, however. Either their challenges were ignored and discussion simply moved on. Or challengers were seen as defending whites, whether themselves or other whites.

Metonymies can operate benignly, of course. But they often have the effect of limiting the array of options worth considering. For SNCC workers, and I argue, for activists long after, participatory democracy came to be seen as principled rather than pragmatic, aimed at personal self-liberation rather than political change, and white rather than black. The explicitly political benefits of the form were lost.

A few more examples: when union officials in the 1960s farm workers' movement considered the possibility of launching boycotts and marches, they rejected such tactics as "not the union

way” (Ganz 2000). “Union way” stood metonymically for a variety of things: political secularism, an unwillingness to engage in moral and emotional appeals, most important, an approach that was *not* that of the civil rights movement or a religious campaign. But the effect was to refuse tactics that could have energized the labor movement. When the alternative health care workers Sherryl Kleinman (1996) studied insisted that meetings of their collective should be recorded in careful minutes, even though no one actually ever used or referred to the minutes, because doing so was a sign that they were a “serious organization,” they ended up spending a great deal of energy demonstrating that they were like the mainstream organizations that they explicitly disavowed. When anti-corporate globalization activists today dismiss twinkling (wiggling one’s fingers in agreement with a speaker) and vibes watchers in consensus decisionmaking as “Californian,” that is, as apolitical and unconcerned with effective change, they foreclose the question of whether or not such techniques might in fact speed up decisionmaking.

In sum, tracing the establishment of metonymic structures in tactical debates can help us to understand how a tactical commonsense is created and how it then shuts down possibilities as well as opening them up.

### Conclusion

How do we get at the role of culture in shaping strategic possibilities without representing activists as strategic dopes or ideological dupes? Assume that like the rest of us, activists are rational, creative, and practical. But, also like the rest of us, they are, among other things, more comfortable with the familiar than the unfamiliar, attuned to the norms of the institutional

settings in which they operate, and fearful of seeming out of the loop in front of people they respect. The virtue of each of the concepts that I have outlined is that they alert us to the institutionalized *sources* of the culture that shapes strategy and to the *mechanisms* by which it does so: *repertoires* by demonstrating broad historical variation in the use of strategies; *institutional norms* by drawing attention to the trade-offs that activists face in challenging convention; and *metonymy* by showing how cultural associations and oppositions are reified as common sense. These are not the only ways that culture shapes strategic action, in addition, that is, to activists' formal principled commitments. We can talk about "tastes" in tactics (Jasper 1997); about logics of appropriateness (XXX); about cognitive schemas; about linguistic tropes such as enthymemes (Feldman and Skoldberg 2002); about social epistemologies of emotions (Polletta 2001). Some of these concepts overlap with the ones I have been describing; they operate variously at macro, meso, and micro levels; and they, too, have the virtue of directing attention to the observable mechanisms by which culture limits not what people can aspire to but what they can easily say.

This does not mean that challenges to mainstream culture always, willy nilly, reproduce the status quo. Rather, for activists, the punch line is that important targets for movement work may be easily missed. Here is one. Rather than only trying to challenge meaning, activists should challenge the social organization of meaning, the standards that define what counts as authoritative meaning. In his study of activism around AIDS, Steve Epstein (1996) shows that activists succeeded in gaining formal representation on federal research review committees. But they also gained recognition for AIDS patients' personal accounts of their illnesses as authoritative knowledge in drug research. Refusing the conventional antinomies of subjective

and objective knowledge, reason and emotion, and science and folklore, they sought and won legitimacy for storytelling as a form of authoritative knowledge. Activists might work to gain authority for personal storytelling in contexts where statistics are called for and to gain authority for statistics where personal storytelling is expected.

The other target for movement work—and this I think is less banal than it seems—is the metonymies that structure activists’ own tactical commonsense. All groups engage in shorthand, and group shorthands are as much about signaling membership as expediting tasks. The challenge is to ensure that such shorthands do not have the effect of trading scrutiny for unity, challenge for being in the know.

The message for people who study activism is that paying attention to culture does not mean trading description for explanation; it does not mean focusing only on microinteraction at the expense of the large forces and structures that people confront; and it does not mean treating people simply as vehicles of cultural tropes that are beyond their control. Rather, it sheds light on important dynamics both of innovation and constraint, dynamics that operate outside movements as well as in them.

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