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Discussion Notes for CBSM plenary: “The Formation and Development of Strategy”

As the panelists today have shown, the formation and development of organizational and movement strategy has myriad roots with profound influences on movements themselves and on the ways we study them.

One important aspect of strategic decision-making, as referenced by our panelists today is the structural and cultural factors that influence organization’s tactical and strategic decisions:

In thinking about organization’s strategic decisions, Robnett and Alabi remind us about the importance of leadership, fundraising and organizational structure in agenda setting and event organizing. They argue that the unique combination manifest in the case of the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network created a particular range of strategic possibilities that resulted in a unique structure of a “corporate SMO”. The “corporate SMO” model allowed the entrepreneurial leader, Russell Simmons, to act quickly and decisively to pursue options that he believed would be most successful at reaching out to urban black youth and promoting the “get out the vote” campaign.

Leach, in her analysis of the Autonomes, is also concerned, in part, about the forces that influence organizational strategic decisions. She moves the focus toward the grassroots and emphasizes the significance of ideology and identity among organizational membership in influencing and shaping organizational decisions and movement

participation. Leach shows that it is through the negotiation of contradictions within ideology that the organization's membership was able to determine their range of strategic choices for action. In fact, Leach shows, it is specifically around the tension of how to engage in political action in public v. within the group that crystallizes the contradiction in ideology between oppositional and constructivist autonomy.

The panelists also underscore many of the factors that shape the strategic decisions of movements overall.

Alimi's work on activists in the Occupied Territories draws out the ways that perception of opportunities and threats influences decisions about action; he shows that public and individual perceptions and media representations effect organizations' and individuals' strategic decisions about political action.

These individual cases underscore a critical point about the nature of movement's strategic decisions. Within a cycle of protest, or a movement community, the actions and strategic decisions of any one organization or a group of organizations necessarily shapes the political landscape in ways that then influence other social movement organizations and other movements.

For example, returning to Robnett and Alabi's work on the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network, the approach that the organization favored for recruiting hip-hop fans to political voting campaigns is clearly interconnected with the overall focus on "get out the

vote” campaigns prior to the 2004 election. There were many organizations, as many of you know, that were dedicated to getting out the democratic vote. Organizations like ACT (America Coming Together) sponsored canvassing campaigns in swing states; Move On engaged in extensive voter education and mobilization. And, Hip Hop Summit Action Network worked to mobilize disenfranchised urban and black youth. The fact that the 2004 presidential election had the greatest voter turn out in U.S. history is due, at least in part, to strategic decisions on the part of a large number of leftist SMOs to first, focus their agenda on the election, and secondly, to target critical electoral groups with GOTV efforts. The decisions of early groups to focus on the election clearly influenced the decisions of later groups to join the effort.

In short, social movement organizations’ range of choices are shaped by the decisions of other SMOs at least as much as they are by the overall political opportunity structure. This point brings us to a significant theme that unifies these presentations. Each of today’s panelists have spoken, either directly or indirectly, to the relationship between culture and strategy; emphasizing the ways that culture shapes strategic options.

Polletta began her remarks by pointing out our collective tendency to perceive culture and strategy in oppositional terms; that we tend to assume that cultural commitments lead people to act in accordance with their values, while strategic ones lead people to behave in instrumental ways. She argues, however, that the strategic choices activists make are shaped by cultural forces. And, that the cultural choices activists make are also strategic

ones. Ultimately, what we perceive as strategic and what we perceive as cultural is fundamentally dependent upon cultural biases, norms and institutional structures.

Polletta's example of changing perceptions of participatory democracy as having historically first been considered strategic and later as ideological or cultural is not only an example of cultural norms influencing our categories and assessments but also relates, quite interestingly, to Leach's analysis of contradictions within ideology. Participatory democracy is likely to be both instrumental and ideological within decision-making processes and organizational structures. Drawing on Leach's findings, we can also infer that individual activists' are likely to integrate the repertoire of participatory democracy when it fits both their ideological and strategic objectives but that they do so imperfectly and in contradictory ways.

This dialectical relationship between strategy and culture is further developed in Alimi's analysis of perceptions of threats and opportunities in the Occupied Territories. Alimi argues that threats and opportunities are "perceptual constructs" that are meaningful only in specific political and historical locations from a particular point of view. He also points out that opportunities and threats are "not purely a matter of cultural construction", instead there is a dialectical relationship between the cultural interpretation and the institutionally and structurally bounded political reality.

Through tracking the media representation of political events, Alimi shows how public opinion becomes crystallized over time; that more and more people begin to use the same

framework to understand and interpret an issue. In this way, Alimi shows the process of how institutional norms are constructed and how they shape strategic decisions and political action.

In conclusion, I'd like to highlight summary points from each of the papers:

Polletta challenges us to look at the institutionalized sources of the culture that shapes strategy and the mechanisms by which it does so.

Following this challenging, Alimi reminds us that political opportunities and threats are filtered through a range of cultural lens, both formal and informal, and that it is through those lens that we interpret political opportunities and threats.

Robnett and Alabi encourage us to think about the challenges of an organization that tries to bridge two distinct cultures; in this case a material consumerist culture and a civil rights political culture.

While, Leach argues that ideology and identity should always be treated as incoherent and contradictory to some degree. And, that coherence and clarity in a movement's ideology or identity is not always beneficial for a movement. Instead, the contradictions are critical for understanding organization's and movement's strategic decisions. ]

Each of today's panelists challenge us to think about strategic decision-making as an integral part of social movement action. But, each also reminds us that strategic decision-

making is a chaotic and fluid process that is influenced by a range of both cultural and structural elements.

Thank you.