

Reflections on Social Movement Strategy
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Hofstra College

*“Hope is belief in the plausibility of the possible over the necessity of the probable.”
Maimonides.*

Social scientists engage with some phenomena more easily than others. They focus on the probable – patterns that constrain behavior, making it predictable. Leaders of social movements, on the other hand, focus on the possible, discovering paths of action that can plausibly produce desired outcomes. For strategists of change, the plausible is a critical focus, especially if the desired change is not only in the distribution of resources, but in ways of valuing resources – and of self, community, and the world. So it's a daunting project to theorize the agency at the heart of strategic imagination, when the focus of so much work has been to theorize structure as a source of constraint on agency.

This conference is an attempt to confront that problem so I want to thank you for inviting me to participate, especially on this opening panel.

This morning's presentations each tackle a distinct aspect of the social movement strategy question. One paper, Verta and Katrina's, focuses on the strategic evolution of a social movement tactic, gay marriage. They show us how social movement tactics work - as distinct from interest group tactics – in the identity work through which they articulate – and seek legitimacy for – the values they espouse (which I address later as narrative). Dennis and Deanna's paper on strategic articulation opens a very original window on the dynamics – not simply the structures - that shape choices that social movement strategists must make. In particular, they show us how we can look at interorganizational dynamics that are more or less supportive of social movement objectives. David and Suzanne, point us to a variety of factors that analysts can consider in distinguishing among strategies including demands, arenas, and tactics. They distinguish especially as to strategic scope and domain: political, communal, and organizational. Finally, Jim argues that study of strategy needs to be reconceptualized more as a process, requires focus at the micro level, and full appreciation of the motivational issues involved in social action, especially strategic social action.

In response to these papers, I'd like to offer my own perspective on social movement strategy, commenting on those points where we share perspective, and where we differ, in hopes of generating a productive round of discussion of the important theoretical and empirical question.

What is strategy?

We have several definitions – it's a plan (intentional), its choices (decision making), and it's an interaction. Although there are elements of truth in each of these, I want to pose a prior question: is it a process or is it a thing. In this I agree with Jim and differ with David

and Suzanne. I argue strategy is not a plan, although it involves planning, but is a process by means of which actors theorize or hypothesize an action or series of actions that could be sufficient to produce a desired outcome. The object of the process is turning what we have (resources) into what we need (power) to get what we want (outcomes).

In social movements, because they are about current action to achieve future change, strategists have to figure out how to achieve outcomes in the face of a highly uncertain context. Because outcomes result from a process of interaction with intentions, reactions, and actions of others, it requires ongoing reevaluation, adaptation, and innovation. And because they challenge the status quo, social movements can rarely compete with their opponents in the deployment of conventional resources but, rather, must learn how to use their own resources more creatively, or resourcefully, so as to realize advantages that would otherwise be denied.

This is the tension in strategy, what makes it interesting, and why it matters so much.

So strategy is not only a process, not only about power, but it is an inherently *creative process*. Unlike the algorithmic problem solving suggested by terms like “repertoires”, as Jim points out, strategy more often involves heuristic problem solving. One can think of the former as a selection process in which identifying the right markers matters, as does the quality of implementation. The heuristic process, however, is one of innovation – in which asking the right questions matters. So the image one has in one’s mind of how we do strategy has a big influence on what factors turn out to have the greatest influence.

As Verta and Katrina point out, strategy is especially interesting in social movements because they are not only trying to reconfigure resources (economic, political moral), but they are also trying to *reconfiguring meaning* – identity, values, legitimacy, etc. Although I agree with Jim that emotion matters, I differ in that I think strategy - theorizing – has a motivational counterpart in narrative or story. Successful social movements leaders, in my view, learn both to devise imaginative strategy and to tell a compelling story – and the story is where much of the meaning making, or cultural, work is done – enacting new rituals, linking individual transformation with institutional transformation, creating the motivation to risk, to venture into the unknown, to trump fear with hope, apathy with anger, isolation with solidarity, and self-doubt with efficacy. Story, in other words, can answer the question of **WHY** must we do this. Strategy, on the other hand, answers the question of **HOW** we can do this. Their interaction centers on the element common to story and strategy, the exercise of agency under conditions of uncertainty, in both emotional and conceptual terms.

If a process then elements are

Goals. We can understand “goals” as motivating values. On the first night of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, for example, Dr. King articulated its motivating goals as gaining God’s justice, American justice, and racial justice.

Outcomes. We can understand “outcomes” as specific objectives – objectives in which “demands” may play a part. Again, in the same Bus Boycott talk, Dr. King articulated the outcome sought after as desegregation of the busses – specific, clear, measurable.

Theory of Change (assumptions about how those outcomes can be achieved): power, information, and inspiration. A most widely shared assumptions in today’s world of market preferences is that information and inspiration will do the job. At the end of Al Gore’s *Inconvenient Truth*, for example, we are offered a menu of individual actions we can take, but not enrolled in a collective effort aimed at creating the power to overcome a powerful opposition.

Targeting – choices about where to focus limited resources, not just who to “target”, but the overall question of where to focus – on buses, for example, not schools, voting, or lunch counters. The “arena” in which to do combat is one among many targeting choices.

Tactics – specific activities, the value of which depends on their strategic efficacy. Can they influence the outcome, do they create capacity, do they develop leadership, do they use resources well, do they meet the narrative test, as well as the power test – e.g., vigil across from the DiGiorgio camp.

Timing. Strategy unfolds over time, in interaction, as do opportunities, some of which are generated by strategic outcomes themselves. A change in the environment may increase the value of ones resources for a moment, and then its over; the way a famine in creases the value of a grain holding, or an imminent election increases the value of swing votes. Good strategists are attuned to this fluctuation in the value of their resources, prove able to “take the current when it serves” or lose their ventures. Furthermore, moments of victory may also be a moments of greatest vulnerability, when whole new sources of opposition emerge. Victories have to be secured, as we have all learned, not only “won.”

Scope and Scale – strategic outcomes differ as to the scope and the scale, but strategy comes into play whenever intentional choices are made, as opposed to following routine, or well known rituals. Responding “habitually” is not a strategic response – it not crafted as a choice mindful of the specific conditions (resources, constraints, etc.) under which the response made. It is part of a “routine”, whether appropriate or not. Whenever the college administration does something we don’t like, we take up a petition. Why? Well, that what we always do. Responding “reactively” is not strategic either – it is to respond from fear, threat, rage – responses that, because they are not mindful choices, may give one’s opponent great advantages. So one needs to specify whether one is focused on a macro outcome (passing the 1964 voting right act) or a micro outcome (getting the path to Montgomery cleared) – a short-term outcome (getting the law passed) or a long-term outcome (achieving full political representation for African Americans across the south). One of the more interesting dynamics is between the two.

Who does the strategizing – strategy is an exercise in agency, in which the character of the agents matters: their background, their motivations, their experience, etc. And so do

the conditions under which do they do their strategizing. Because structure creates space as well as boundaries, social scientist need to understand how strategists can make good use of the structural contexts in which they find themselves, not only how those contexts constrain their choices. I call this understanding “strategic capacity.”

In sum, I argue that strategy is most usefully understood as a process, a way of processing information, imagining futures, and making choices -- not a thing. It is something you do, not something you have. It is intentional, about power, and creative. It usually addresses 5 or so key questions (goals, outcomes, targeting, timing, tactics, scope and scale). And it is influenced by actors, their organizational context, and the broader institutional context.

And finally, developing a deeper understanding of how strategy actually works is one of the areas in which the work of social movement scholars could begin to be of real value to social movement leaders – a gap which Jim clearly identifies in his paper and which surely we ought to be interested in closing.