Players and Arenas

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Players and Processes

Francesca Polletta and Kelsy Kretschmer

In June 1966, leaders of the major civil rights organizations descended on Mississippi to continue a march across the state begun by activist James Meredith. Meredith had been rushed to the hospital when he was shot by a sniper. Despite the show of unity, tensions among the leaders of the march were near-boiling. Roy Wilkins withdrew the support of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) after the young activists of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) recruited an armed black group to provide protection for the marchers. SNCC activists had just deposed their longtime chair John Lewis in favor of the firebrand Stokely Carmichael, and Carmichael used the march to publicly challenge the movement’s commitment to interracialism and nonviolence. After being arrested in Greenwood, he told a crowd after his release from jail, “This is the twenty-seventh time I have been arrested. I ain’t going to jail no more. ... The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin’ us is to take over. We been saying freedom for six years and we ain’t got nothin’. What we gonna start saying now is Black Power” (quoted in Sellers, 1990: 166-167). The slogan created a national sensation, with commentators predicting black violence and reporters swarming into Mississippi to cover nightly rallies where chants of “Black Power” drowned out the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s chants of “Freedom Now.” A beleaguered Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to hold the contending groups together and to continue to advocate for nonviolence. When marchers were attacked by local police wielding clubs and tear gas, King complained, “The government has got to give me some victories if I’m gonna keep people nonviolent” (quoted in Carson, 1981: 210).

Amid the tension on the march, there were moments of levity. SNCC activists said that Dr. King proved to be “easygoing, with a delightful sense of humor” (Sellers, 1990: 164). When two reporters jockeying for position to interview the leaders of the march broke into an argument, marchers watched with amusement. They began to chant, “Dissension in the ranks! Dissension in the ranks!” Reporters and cameramen got into the spirit of it too, chanting in return, “Press Power! Press Power!”
The episode points to the virtues of a strategic approach to factionalism. Where factional battles are often seen as an abdication of strategic good sense and as a sign of the organization or movement's disintegration, this episode reveals actors performing factional differences in strategic bids for support. Those bids were both competing and overlapping: note, in this respect, King's effort to play off Carmichael's militancy by suggesting that government concessions would help him to keep the movement nonviolent. The audiences for the bids were numerous and diverse. In addition to the government, both King and Carmichael (and Wilkins) were playing to local black Mississippians and Northern white supporters, to Northern urban blacks who had sat out the movement so far and to labor and liberal allies who were worried about new strains of separatism in the movement, to a national press and an international one. And they operated with a keen sense of the logics of the different arenas in which they were playing. They all knew that reporters wanted stories about movement infighting. That was the joke. (And the reporters' joke, in turn, centered on the performative aspect of Black Power. As Carmichael acknowledged privately, neither he nor anyone really knew what Black Power meant). The trick – the challenge – for activists was to capitalize on the logic of the arena while still playing on their own terms.

It was not, of course, that Carmichael and King and the others were only playing. Carmichael was angry and King surely was dispirited by the repudiation of nonviolence. And it was not that their strategies were fully worked out or necessarily effective. But the strategies were taken with an eye to the likely responses of other strategic players and with a sense of the goals that motivated them.

A strategic perspective departs from the literature on factionalism in at least two key respects. First, where the literature has tended to treat the causes of factionalism as internal to the organization, this perspective encourages us to see how actors outside the organization – police and state authorities, allies and opponents, funders, and the press – play key roles in the emergence of factions and in their trajectories. Certainly organizational structures affect the ways in which disputes take shape and are handled. But the research on the topic has yielded conflicting findings. Some scholars have argued that groups without a centralized structure are more likely to face factionalism because they lack a central authority to quell disputes (Gamson, 1990; Miller, 1983). Other scholars have argued that groups with a centralized structure are more likely to face organizational schisms because of their rigidity when it comes to embracing new issues (Valocchi, 2001). Small, exclusive organizations have been seen as more vulnerable
to factionalism because they require greater ideological and membership conformity (Zald and Ash, 1966). On the other hand, coalitions may be prone to dissolution because they drain resources from member organizations (Staggenborg, 1986).

Scholarship on the environmental conditions in which factions are likely to emerge is valuable in directing attention outside the organization (e.g., Balser, 1997; Staggenborg, 1986; Zald and McCarthy, 1980). But that scholarship does not go far enough, we argue, in capturing the interactional processes involved. It seems clear that movement actors interpret environmental changes (the passage of legislation, an offer of support by elites, and so on) through the lens of their previous interactions with the actor or agency in question. These suggest the value of thinking less in terms of environmental conditions than in terms of movement players’ relationships with other players, and how the typical practices of each player may produce divisive pressures on movement groups.

The kind of strategic perspective developed in this volume departs from the literature, second, in treating factionalization as a process with multiple causes and uncertain outcomes. Social movement scholars have tended rather to see factional battles as sounding the death knell for the organization (McAdam, 1982; Piven and Cloward, 1977; Stern, Tarrow, and Williams, 1971). Certainly, factionalism has real and often lasting liabilities for the movement. Factional battles absorb activists’ energies and undermine the group’s esprit de corps (Benford, 1993). They communicate to supporters and the public that the organization is conflicted and fragile, and perhaps not worth supporting. They are easily played up by opponents as a way to discredit the movement as a serious political contender (Benford, 1993). Yet, scholars have also drawn attention to factionalism’s upsides. Factional battles are absorbing, and the collective identity that develops within the contending groups can keep people in and involved in the organization long after they might ordinarily have drifted away (Benford, 1993; Hart and Van Vugt, 2006). Factional battles can help to clarify the group’s agenda (Ghaziani, 2008) and to raise money from supporters concerned about extremists taking over (Haines, 1984). Organizational schisms can lead the expelled organization to reach out to new constituencies (Kretschmer, 2009; 2010) and give new momentum to the organization doing the expelling (Balser, 1997).

The point is not only that factionalism has benefits, but also that factional battles can unfold in different ways. We need to ask not only, when do factions emerge, but when do they become organizationally debilitating? Why are factional fights sometimes averted altogether or resolved once they have
begun? When factional battles do prove organizationally debilitating, do they necessarily foreclose the possibility of future collaboration? Again, to answer these questions requires examining not just the organizational conditions in which factions emerge, but also the interactions among diverse actors, within the organization and outside it, that trigger factional battles and shape their trajectories. Indeed, we will show that factions that have broken away in fury to found their own organizations have often ended up enjoying collaborative relationships with just those organizations. The conditions of the original schism matter less than interactions subsequent to the schism.

In line with a strategic perspective, then, we emphasize the influence of interactional processes rather than originating conditions. We see actors defining and pursuing their interests in interaction with diverse actors, who are themselves in interaction with other actors. We also want to press for an expansion of a strategic perspective, however, one that captures the fact that, to put it glibly, factional battles are so often about something else. Organizational members fight for a more democratic structure or more aggressive direct action and they do so, they say, for a combination of ideological and strategic reasons. But often, we argue, the battle is about other things: about newcomers’ sense of being excluded from an inner core of longtime friends, about conflicts that are based on race or class rather than on tactical or ideological differences, or about old battles rather than new ones. It is not only that individuals and groups’ goals are often multiple and sometimes unacknowledged. It is also that the choices that are on the table in a dispute – that is, the means with which to reach groups’ goals – are viewed through the lens of preexisting frameworks of meaning. An option comes to be viewed as the “black” choice or the “strategic” option, not because of any logical connection to what is black or what is instrumental, but rather because of structures of symbolic associations that predate this particular battle. This necessarily complicates any account of factionalism’s causes and of its effects. Of course, disputes within movements are also shaped by broad social conceptions of the political, the normative, and the strategic. But we believe it is worthwhile focusing on more recent, less deep-rooted cultural associations. Doing so, we argue, demonstrates the compatibility of a cultural structuralist perspective with a strategic one.

Players

We begin by identifying some of the external actors who often play a role in factional battles. They do not act unilaterally; instead, we emphasize the
interactions between (incipient) factional movement groups and the media, government agencies and actors, and other movements.

*Government* actors and agencies’ actions may create conflict both by creating new leverage for a group within an organization that has not had much power in the past and by confronting movement groups with difficult and divisive strategic choices. As an example of the first dynamic, when the American government passed the National Industry Recovery Act (1933) and the Wagner Act (1935), giving workers the right to organize, John Lewis of the United Mine Workers saw an opportunity to organize workers in the basic industries, who were largely unrepresented by the craft-based American Federation of Labor. The AFL refused to organize along industry lines and expelled the new Congress of Industrial Organizations, which became a rival federation (Balser, 1997; Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin, 2003).

As an example of the first and second dynamics, in 1961, Attorney General Robert Kennedy offered SNCC activists Justice Department protection and foundation funding to launch a Southern voter registration campaign. The offer was appealing to some within SNCC who were already interested in voter registration work, but others were suspicious. SNCC was getting massive national publicity for the freedom rides, interracial bus rides that were provoking Southern white mob violence and, as a result, federal intervention. Kennedy was trying to buy the group off, some said, by pushing them into a form of activism that was simply less contentious. The battle within the group between proponents of direct action and voter registration was fierce and threatened to tear the organization apart. It was resolved first by creating direct action and voter registration wings of the organization, and then by joining the two forms of action (Carson, 1981).

*Police, FBI, and other repressive agencies* also confront movement groups with difficult and often conflict-producing strategic choices. When police come down hard on demonstrators, activists must decide whether to adopt less assertive strategies. Some within the group may see retreat as the better part of wisdom. Others may argue for provoking the police still further, with the hope that police overreaction will make for good media copy. And still others will be so angered by their experience that they cannot really conceive of retreat, whether they argue in strategic terms or not.

As Lipsky pointed out, “Police may be conceived as ‘street-level bureaucrats’ who ‘represent’ government to people” (1970: 1). This helps to explain why in new left groups in the United States, Germany, Italy, and Japan, some members radicalized, factionalized, and went underground after the death of a group member or someone close to the group at the hands of police (Zwerman, Steinhoff, and della Porta, 2000).
delegitimized the state for some members of the group and threw them into conflict with those who were unwilling to turn to illegal measures (della Porta and Fillieule, 2004). Police repression of Russian Bolsheviks in the 1890s contributed to a rift between intellectuals and working-class members of the party by inflating intellectuals’ sense of bearing the costs of radicalism at a time when the working class were hunkering down to survive economically (Brym, 1988).

Police do not inevitably come down hard on protesters. To the contrary, police are strategic actors too, trying just as hard to read the likely consequences of their actions not only on protesters, but also on reporters and local elites. When Southern sheriffs began to back off from the violence of water hoses and attack dogs unleashed on civil rights protesters, they created conflict within the civil rights movement on what to do next. Direct action depended on violent overreaction for its effect. When it no longer achieved that, some of those who had been ideologically committed to nonviolent direct action began to question its utility (Von Eschen, Kirk, and Pinard, 1969). Activists try to anticipate authorities’ next move, but what makes it more difficult is that police agencies operate on the basis of logics that are bureaucratic as much as oriented to objective criteria of threat or danger. The Federal Bureau of Investigation’s COINTELPRO (COunter INTELligence PROgram) in the 1960s identified national left and black organizations as a threat, and then targeted local chapters of those organizations – whatever their size, level of militancy, or capacity to organize disruptive actions (Cunningham, 2003).

Police agencies may also play a direct role in producing movement conflict. When the FBI infiltrated the anti-Vietnam War organization Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) as part of COINTELPRO, infiltrators were instructed to play up the battle between the Progressive Labor and National Office factions within SDS (Marx, 1979). More generally, the suspected presence of infiltrators may undermine the relations of trust within the group. Betty Friedan apparently believed that lesbians in the National Organization for Women (NOW) were being controlled by the FBI, and this was why she did not take their concerns more seriously, she said later (Rosen, 2000). If the person you are disagreeing with may be a government spy, it is hardly worth the effort to try to work through your differences with them.

Media players are undeniably important to movement groups’ chances for success. And media coverage poses all kinds of strategic choices for movement groups, choices that can create sharp conflict. If the press asks to speak to your “leader,” do you insist that you have no leaders, even if the
reporter is likely to hang up and find someone who is willing to call herself a leader? Do you continue to speak to the press even if it keeps misrepresenting you? What makes it even more difficult and divisive, we believe, is that activists rarely know just what the effect of media coverage will be. They know that reporters are drawn to stories of movement infighting, but is such coverage good or bad for the movement? Some have argued that coverage of movement groups, whatever its tenor, publicizes the group as a legitimate political actor (Rohlinger, 2006). By contrast, in their survey of coverage of American protest groups, described in Chapter 10, Amenta and his colleagues found that when stories centered on group infighting, the group's main demands were less likely to be covered.

It is difficult to choose a strategic option if the likely consequences are unclear. Could SDS activists have known that media coverage of the group in 1965 would attract not only scores of new members, but also a new kind of member – less politically serious, more radical for radicalism's sake? The new members would not only strain the group's tight-knit community but also introduce a confrontational stance that figured as one side in factional battles that enveloped the group in 1965 and 1966 (Gitlin, 1980). SNCC workers deliberately sought out white Northern student volunteers to bring publicity to the Southern struggle, publicity they knew that a group of black activists would not get. Still, when the publicity was forthcoming, and centered almost exclusively and admiringly, on the white students, SNCC activists were frustrated. Factional battles that later took place over the place of whites in the movement had their roots in part in the media coverage that SNCC had sought.

Finally, arguments about the deleterious effects of media coverage may be fueled by sheer resentment on the part of people in the group: why is that person or that group or that tactic getting all the attention? Emotional arguments and strategic ones are not necessarily at odds; but, given the privileged place of strategy in movement deliberations, it may be easy to express (and even experience) one's resentment about one's treatment in the group as a strategic complaint.

Supporters and allies are important audiences for movement groups' actions, as well as players in their own right. Group members who are in close contact with funders, providers of legal support, and other allies are probably more sensitive to the dangers of alienating them than are members who are not. They may be firm defenders of a more moderate strategy (Bevington, 2009). On the other hand, some members' proximity to elites may become a bone of contention, whether or not those members counsel moderation. Battles may be prompted by groups seeking to appeal
to a different set of supporters and allies. In 1967 SNCC chairperson Stokely Carmichael refused to continue making speeches to white audiences. He said that he was coming under fire from black groups for the hypocrisy of calling for a black movement and taking speaking engagements only with white audiences. The dilemma, of course, was that white audiences could pay better (Carson, 1981).

Movement groups and subgroups interact with other movements and movement groups, and these external players can also contribute to factionalism. A group's ability to lure recruits away from other movement groups is a sign of success. But new members may bring with them values and perspectives that are foreign or unwelcome to the original group members. For example, relatively soon after its founding, the National Organization for Women began attracting the younger, more radical women associated with the women's liberation movement (Echols, 1989). New members pushed for new sets of priorities, in particular, more aggressive stands on issues like abortion. But veteran members worried that such a stand might alienate the more conservative women that the movement desperately needed. The influx of new members led eventually to the exit of conservative Midwestern women, who went on to form the Women's Equity Action League (WEAL) (Kretschmer, 2010). The environmental direct action group Earth First! attracted activists from the peace, labor, and feminist movements, who eventually pressed for a social justice focus that was at odds with the founders' focus on biocentrism and led to an organizational schism (Balser, 1997). The environmentalist Sierra Club was plunged into a factional battle over whether to propose a tighter immigration policy after anti-immigration activists flooded the organization in a deliberate attempt to take over the organization (King, 2008).

Other movements may also play a less direct role in internal movement battles. They may be less a recruiting ground or hijacker than a desired ally or competitor. For example, Students for a Democratic Society expelled the Progressive Labor faction within the group when they were directed to do so by the Black Panther Party. The Black Panthers had no formal authority over SDS, but the group was eager to prove its allegiance to a black nationalist agenda and the Panthers had decided that Progressive Labor was at odds with that agenda (Balser, 1997). Similarly, in SNCC, those who forced the expulsion of whites from the organization in 1966 insisted that remaining interracial would cost the group alliances with black nationalists as well as recruiting opportunities among Northern urban black youth (Carson, 1981).

So far, we have emphasized the difficult choices presented to movement groups by external actors. Some people within the group may believe that
one option, say, responding aggressively to police repression, makes the most sense, and others may disagree. That may lead to difficult and sometimes debilitating battles. However, movement groups are rarely of one mind even before they are confronted with these difficult choices. There were SNCC activists who wanted to shift to voter registration well before the Justice Department proposed just that; in fact, those activists eagerly courted administration officials. In this respect, we need to think of incipient factional groups as strategic actors themselves, looking to impress their goals on sometimes reluctant organizational comrades. In other words, although external actors sometimes force divisive choices on groups, more often, those choices are taken up and promoted by players within the group. This is especially clear when it comes to outside movement groups. The SNCC activists who argued that expelling whites would increase their credibility with Northern urban black youths had already defined their goals as in line with those being promoted by black nationalist groups. Their identification with a black nationalist agenda preceded their recognition of the benefits of appealing to young black Northerners. Movement organizations are thus themselves arenas of contention. People within the group see and act on opportunities to press their goals and priorities by interpreting signals from outside the group.

Note also that groups within the organization or movement may be motivated less by their determination to press a particular tactic or agenda or to increase their own influence than by more fundamental identity concerns. Organizational schisms emerged in the Italian Communist Party, the Church of England, and a right-wing Italian party when some within the group came to believe that a planned change threatened the group’s fundamental identity (Sani, 2008). Dissidents felt that the organization was not what it had been, that it had lost touch with its original purpose, and that they had no kinship with the future of the organization. In the Amsterdam squatters’ movement, those who argued for escalating the struggle did so on the basis of a story about the movement’s past victories that, despite its inaccuracy, captured their sense of who they were (Owens, 2009). Indeed, it is probably rare that contenders’ goals are purely instrumental.

That said, we have argued that even groups that are unified around a common goal and means of achieving it are vulnerable to disputes. Activists struggle to predict the likely actions of other political players (both within and outside the organization) and to predict how those actions are likely to be interpreted by diverse audiences. Not only do movement players face hard choices, they do so with limited information. You may not know that the guy who is arguing so persuasively for
breaking with the group’s commitment to nonviolence is an FBI agent. You may not be able to predict that the eager new members you have recruited to the group will bring in a sensibility that is at odds with that of veterans. You may not know that the people who are arguing vociferously against having anything to do with the press are mainly resentful that they have never been interviewed. You may not know that some of the people who are arguing just as vociferously to keep talking to the press brought the issue up because they wanted to force out members whom they saw as politically impractical. People’s goals are multiple, ambiguous, and often opaque, even to themselves. That makes anticipating their actions difficult. In particular, we have argued that external actors like the police, press, and government agencies operate on the basis of institutional logics that may lead them to behave in ways that are difficult to anticipate. These sources of uncertainty undermine activists’ ability to avoid potentially divisive internal conflicts. They suggest, however, that we pay attention to the conditions in which groups are able to defuse or resolve such conflicts.

Factional Battles Defused, Diverted, or Overcome

When are factional battles defused or overcome? There is surprisingly little attention to this question in the social movement literature. In a study of church factionalism, Dyck and Starke (1999) found that churches that brought in external mediators were less able to overcome their conflicts and prevent the faction from leaving the church than those that relied on internal mediators. But the line between internal and external when it comes to mediating factional battles may be nuanced. Factional battles in a number of movements have been defused by the presence of movement mediators: people who are respected by members of the group, indeed, are seen as part of the group or close to the group, but are not seen as invested in the conflict. They are above the fray. For example, in 1961 the battle in SNCC over the merits of voter registration or direct action was defused when SNCC advisor Ella Baker suggested that group pursue both strategies simultaneously. Baker was older than SNCC members, had experience in a variety of movements, and took special pains not to be seen as directive, even though, former SNCC activists acknowledge now, she was tremendously influential (Polletta, 2002). Longtime pacifist A. J. Muste was famous in the peace movement for mediating among contending factions. Marguerite Rawalt, a highly respected lawyer and founding member of
NOW, served as a bridge among feminists and more conservative women's organizations in the 1970s, helping the otherwise antagonistic groups cooperate on gender discrimination lawsuits (Paterson, 1986). Leaders in the 1980s Brazilian student movement who were positioned at the intersection of multiple institutions (party politics, religion, professional associations, and popular protest) drew communicative resources from those institutions to bridge factional groups within the movement (Mische, 2008).

Along with the availability of a mediator, taking actions designed to make a factional group feel that it has a voice in the organization seems to be important to avoiding schism. Sani's (2008) study of factionalism in the Church of England and in Italian political groups showed that when groups were convinced that they would continue to have a role and voice in the organization, in other words, that their dissent would not marginalize them, they were unlikely to secede from the organization.

Organizational and movement cultures variously supply incentives and resources for defusing infighting – or for stoking it. In SNCC in the early 1960s, it was perfectly appropriate in the middle of a fierce battle over strategy to pause and ask everyone to hold hands and sing “We Shall Overcome.” In SNCC after 1965, such a proposal would have met with derision. In progressive movements more generally during that period, sticking to a rigid ideological line that brooked no compromise was seen as a marker of one's commitment and radicalism. A propensity for interpersonal conflict and factional battle was a favored activist style. In Brazilian student politics of the 1990s, an embrace of “nonsectarianism” became the favored activist style. Activists who had come of age in the late 1980s were much more used to overtly partisan contention; in this new climate, factions seemed to one-up each other in their renunciation of factionalism (Mische, 2008).

In their study of radically democratic German movement groups, Rothschild and Leach (2007) found “conflict avoidant” cultures, where members strove to avoid battles, and ignored hierarchies of influence when they showed signs of emerging, and “fight” cultures, where members thrived on internal battles. The organizations attracted people with contentious or conflict-averse sensibilities, and then members perpetuated those styles. All the organizations were formally participatory democratic, but they practiced their commitments in very different ways, and behavior that might have caused an organizational crisis in the conflict-avoidant groups was seen as normative in the fight-oriented groups. This suggests, again, that a group's formal organizational structure may not predict its propensity to factionalism: its culture matters, too.
After the Schism

If movement scholars have tended to treat factionalism as leading straightforwardly to organizational schism, they have tended even more to see organizational schisms as permanent. But they may not be. In her study of 14 organizations that broke away from the National Organization from Women between 1968 and 2009, Kretschmer (2009; 2010) found that the conditions in which the new organization was founded did not account for whether the group ended up later in a supportive or conflictual relationship with NOW.

What accounted for the different scenarios? Conflict between the breakaway group and NOW was often hardened when the new organization allied with a different movement. The new alliance often led the breakaway organization to accentuate its differences of priority with NOW. That dynamic was exacerbated by an influx of new members from the allied movement. For example, the October 17th organization, so named for the day it split from NOW (it later changed its name to The Feminists), was readily absorbed by the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM). Members of the WLM frequently accused NOW of mimicking oppressive male systems and criticized its hierarchical organizational structure and reform-oriented goals. Despite continuing friendships between The Feminists’ founder Ti-Grace Atkinson and NOW leaders, The Feminists recruited WLM activists who would have nothing to do with NOW. The Feminists formally disavowed any connection to NOW, and refused to participate in any event run by NOW (Kretschmer, 2010). Similarly, Feminists for Life (FFL), a splinter group that disagreed with NOW’s abortion stance, initially tried to collaborate with NOW on other issues. At the same time, however, the group was enthusiastically embraced by the religious pro-life movement, which invited FFL to its conferences and meetings. As more religious women joined FFL, its pro-life identity began to supersede its feminist identity. It began to cast NOW, along with other feminist organizations, as enemies to be fought (Kretschmer, 2010).

Allying with another movement drew breakaway organizations into permanent conflict with the parent because contrasting themselves to the parent helped in marketing the group to new audiences. However, the character of breakaway organizations’ long-term goals mitigated these pressures. When breakaway organizations maintained the institutional reform goals held by the parent, the new group was likely to de-emphasize the prior conflict between the organizations. For example, Women’s Equity Action League (WEAL) formed when a faction of Midwestern women broke with NOW after a series of unpopular policy stances taken by leaders. Despite the contentious break and continued conflict with NOW president Betty
Friedan, founder Elizabeth Boyer insisted that WEAL present a united front with NOW to audiences outside the movement. The two organizations frequently met with congressional representatives together and provided opportunities for each other to testify before Congress about gender equality. WEAL leaders intentionally downplayed conflict with NOW to institutional elites, believing that a united feminist movement would produce greater pressure for legal reforms. Together, these cases suggest that where allying with other movements pulls organizations born of schism farther apart, the pressures of reform politics may pull them back toward each other.

**Structure and Strategy**

So far, we have sketched some of the ways in which a strategic, processual approach that is focused on players operating in fields in which other players are also operating is useful in understanding the causes and consequences of factionalism. Activists are strategic when they fight as much as when they cooperate. They battle, break away, and refuse to collaborate down the road when it makes good sense. But this is not the good sense of game theory. As we have shown, activists are driven as much by identity as by interest, and as much by anger and resentment as by a cool calculation of costs and benefits. They are motivated by goals, but goals that are multiple, ambiguous and changing.

This is a complex picture. To gain analytic purchase on strategic choice in the swirl of multiple players, audiences, complex goals, and ambivalent emotions, Jasper (2004) introduces the concept of strategic dilemmas, a concept that is developed in this volume. We, too, have referred to strategic dilemmas in accounting for activists’ choices. But, as we discuss in these concluding pages, we also believe that the concept of strategic dilemmas makes only partial sense of what is often at stake in factional battles. Accordingly, we argue for integrating more of a cultural structuralist perspective into the strategic one developed in this volume.

Dilemmas are difficult choices, choices with trade-offs: for example, whether to try to speak to a broad constituency or mobilize the faithful (the Extension dilemma), whether to focus on one agenda item or multiple ones (the Basket dilemma), whether to use unsavory means for virtuous ends (the Dirty Hands dilemma). Not all movement groups face all the same dilemmas, nor do they experience or respond to them in the same way, but they do encounter these dilemmas with enough regularity that we can use their experiences to build a more sociological understanding of the
dynamics of strategic choice. Internal movement conflicts are especially revealing in this regard, as they usually involve people struggling with these dilemmas (Jasper, 2004: 10). Conflicts shed light on which groups typically encounter certain dilemmas, as well as which people in the group are likely to be invested in one solution rather than another, why certain dilemmas seem more dilemmatic than others, and what the trade-offs end up being. Practically, this also means that groups should be able to mitigate conflicts by drawing attention to the dilemmas that underpin them (Jasper, 2004).

Again, in our discussion, we have drawn attention to many of the strategic dilemmas that Jasper identifies. But here is the problem. Factional battles are often not what they seem to be about. They are often not even what activists think they are about. That means that a well-meaning activist who tried to convince the contenders to focus on the dilemma that was dividing them would not be especially successful. For example, when in 1964 and 1965, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was riven by a battle over the merits of participatory democratic organization, it seemed like a classic iteration of Jasper’s Organization dilemma. Some SNCC activists, led by executive secretary James Forman, argued that the organization’s new size and political stature demanded that it implement more hierarchical and centralized decision-making. Others, led by Mississippi organizer Bob Moses, protested that doing so would stifle the initiative that had been responsible for the group’s greatest successes.

The problem with this characterization is that the battle was also, and over time, centrally, about race. Proponents of participatory democracy, “freedom highs,” were cast as intellectual, self-indulgent, and white. “Hard-liner” proponents of centralized and top-down organization were, increasingly, black. By the end of the battle and the triumph of the hardliners, most whites had left the organization. So, perhaps one could say, in Jasper’s terms, that the real dilemma was the racial one. It was about the place of whites in an organization that had always been both proudly interracial and a predominately black student movement (the Extension dilemma). But that rendering would miss, first, the way in which the two battles were connected. In an important sense, the battle over organizational structure allowed black activists to begin to articulate their complaints about whites. It did not so much reflect preexisting racial conflicts as it helped to forge them, along with the collective identities on which they were based. Second, it would miss the fact that once participatory democracy had come to be seen as white (and as ideological, self-indulgent, as antithetical to power and strategy), it became difficult to argue for participatory democracy, both in SNCC and in a variety of movements since then, as strategic (Polletta, 2005).
The larger point is that the very criteria for assessing options – as strategic or ideological, practical or naive – are shaped by cultural structures that predate this particular instance of decision-making.

We want to distinguish this point from a more familiar structuralist perspective. Such a perspective would claim to be able to predict contenders’ goals in a factional battle from their social position. It would predict that veterans would have a stake in whatever options allowed them to keep the power that came with seniority while newcomers would be much more willing to rock the boat (Barakso, 2004; Staggenborg, 1991). Groups would often fragment along lines of race, gender, class, religion, and sexuality (Zald and Ash, 1966; Benford, 1989; Stark and Bainbridge, 1985). In this perspective, activists have agency, but the explanatory emphasis is on patterns of conflict that have their origins outside the group and have little to do with the actions of this group’s members. Groups’ structural position shapes how they understand what is at stake in a dispute and what they want from it.

We argue that what is structured is less people’s goals than how the options for meeting those goals are viewed: as strategic or ideological, as bourgeois or radical. These views are structured in the sense that they are logically arbitrary and they are resistant (though not immune) to challenge. Unlike a structuralist approach, this one would expect that most contenders would view the options in the same way. Indeed, the surprise is that they would do so, even though, given their goals, they might be expected to evaluate an option quite differently. For example, when the anti-nuclear Clamshell Alliance was wracked by a battle between members who were committed to strict consensus and those who were willing to relax the requirement of strict consensus in the interests of political efficacy, most members interpreted it as a conflict between values of egalitarianism and instrumentalism. When, in a debate over whether to illegally occupy the Seabrook nuclear plant, some members argued that a plant occupation was not successful if it did not produce a “grassroots movement,” their position was seen as privileging egalitarianism over instrumentalism (Downey, 1986: 370). But why was galvanizing local activism seen as the expression of an egalitarian commitment rather than an instrumental one – even by those who argued for it? In fact, initially it was not seen that way. 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. To understand the factional battle, we need to understand how some practices came to be associated with an egalitarian commitment and some came to be associated with an instrumental one.
What is striking here is the association of particular strategies, tactics, targets, organizational forms, or deliberative styles with particular groups of people. To argue for that strategy, tactic, target, form, or style then is taken as a sign of one’s allegiance to that group. In similar fashion, to argue for a bureaucratic structure in the women’s liberation movement was to align oneself with men and the political establishment. That association was not only more important than assessments of bureaucracy’s effectiveness; it also structured assessments of bureaucracy’s effectiveness. To argue for participation in government-sponsored public forums in the 1990s South African environmental movement was to define oneself against the disruptive protest tactics used during the apartheid era, and by association, against the radical commitments of that era (Barnett and Scott, 2007). To adopt a partisan style in the Brazilian student movement of the late 1980s was to identify oneself with opportunistic and corrupt party politics (Mische, 2008).

Elsewhere, Polletta (2006) has argued that one can get at the symbolic shaping of strategic choice by studying the metonymic associations between people, on the one hand, and strategies, tactics, and forms, on the other, that emerge in internal movement deliberations. When SNCC workers attacked a “freedom high” penchant for loose structure as white and as the cause of the group’s organizational paralysis, they not only ignored the fact that many people arguing for loose structure, initially at least, were black; they also failed to explain how implementing top-down structure would supply the programmatic initiative that was desperately needed. When union officials in the 1960s farm workers’ movement rejected boycotts and marches as “not the union way” (Ganz, 2000), the “union way” stood in for a variety of things: political secularism, an unwillingness to engage in moral and emotional appeals, and an approach that was not that of the civil rights movement or a religious campaign. The shorthand indicated the conventionality of the association; but it also prevented union representatives from considering tactics that might have served their unions’ cause.

As the examples above suggest, the symbolic associations that structure strategic choice are not set once and for all time. Indeed, they sometimes shift within a single movement organization over the course of a few years. Participatory democracy was appealing in SNCC in the early 1960s because it was seen as “black”; only a few years before it became decisively, and debilitatingly, seen as “white.” To say that marches were “not the union way” would have made little sense to labor activists for much of the movement’s history. Activists can also deliberately try to change the symbolic associations of a given option, as some feminists did with respect to bureaucratic
organizational forms in the 1970s and 1980s. They are sometimes successful. In other words, the cultural constraints created by the prevailing structure of symbolic associations can be overcome, just as a deficit of funding or the demobilizing efforts of a repressive regime can be overcome. But often they are not overcome, with predictable consequences.

Conclusion

Factional battles are absorbing and enervating. Contending groups often have a sense that everything is at stake in the battle; that what might seem to outsiders a trivial tactical difference is actually a dispute about what the organization most fundamentally is. We have argued that they are not wrong. There are often difficult strategic dilemmas involved in factional battles but there are also questions about whose organization or movement it is: whites or blacks, newcomers or veterans, radicals or moderates. What makes it complicated is that those identity questions are often expressed – and experienced – in terms of strategy. Veterans argue for the tactical superiority of an option because it is their tactic. What makes it even more complicated is that once a strategy, tactic, or form gets associated with one social group (with whites or radicals, newcomers or men), it becomes difficult to argue for or against the option without being heard as arguing for or against the group.

The latter is just one of the ways in which groups outside the movement organization shape the battles that take place within it, albeit, in this case, through symbolic association rather than direct action. In this chapter, we have argued against the standard treatment of factionalism in terms of the organizational conditions that facilitate or inhibit it. Instead, we have depicted activists interacting with a variety of actors, within the movement and outside it. When the police clamp down on protesters, some within the group may argue for pulling back and others for pressing ahead more assertively. Their arguments may be strategic; they may be strategic and emotional; they may be emotional posing as strategic. When another movement group that this movement group admires pushes it to take a particular line on membership or tactics or targets, some within the group may argue for the staying true to the group’s original mission on ideological grounds; some within the group may argue for doing that on strategic grounds; and some may argue against doing that – either on strategic or ideological grounds. External actors such as the police, government agencies, other movement groups, and the media push movement groups into making choices and often those choices divide group members.
Rather than seeing organizational schism as the inevitable denouement of factional battle, we have pointed to several factors—some clearly within the control of activists, others less so—that may play a role in moderating or resolving factional disputes and preventing organizational schism. But even an organizational schism does not necessarily spell the demise of the relationship. In a second departure from the standard treatment of factionalism, we have rejected a view of factionalism leading inevitably to permanent organizational schism. A group that breaks away in fury from its parent organization may end up working collaboratively with it. The ferocity of the schism seems to matter less to the prospects for future collaboration than the group’s assessment down the road of the benefits of working with their former antagonist. Again, however, it is difficult to separate strategy from identity: radical groups might be served well by collaborating with moderate groups, but they are unlikely to even consider that possibility.

In sum, activists are strategic actors as much when they battle one another as when they cooperate. They are not only strategic actors, however, and their ideas about what counts as strategic are shaped by cultural associations that they sometimes challenge but more often do not.

References


