The dilemmas underlying all forms of social movement mobilization can be difficult to see from the standpoint of movement success. When things go well, it seems obvious that the choices and trade-offs made along the way were the right ones for the right times; any previously experienced tensions, ambivalences and uncertainties are easy to sweep under the carpet of memory. When things do not go as planned – despite the skilled, committed and strenuous efforts of organizers – such dilemmas can become more evident to the retrospective eye (although postmortem evaluation sessions can be painful and difficult). But when we observe a fraught episode of movement breakdown unfolding forward – watching the hopes, strategies, mobilization efforts, disappointments, and repair attempts of contending camps develop interactively over time – those dilemmas can leap into clear relief. In such episodes, the tensions generated by the internal complexity of movement arenas become particularly salient and visible, and the interaction of durable relations, individual choices, and situational contingency is particularly potent and fierce.

In this chapter, I analyze a case of the breakdown of an internally fractious movement arena, looking at the interaction of leadership styles and strategies in the dispute over power in a flagship student organization. I focus on the often contentious political arenas that are internal to social movements, in which different camps, factions, and leaders dispute organizational power, access to resources, ideological platforms, action plans, and coalitional tactics. Beyond these explicit stakes, there is often a deeper symbolic contest as well. Actors are disputing the meaning and practice of core political values – democracy, justice, revolution – as differentially interpreted and performed by movement actors. While these symbolic battles are conditioned by – and aim to direct and control – the movement's positioning in broader political fields, they are also directed internally, toward the local “rules of the game” and the formal procedures and informal practices by which the movement itself is organized.

I discuss how these dynamics unfolded in the 1997 annual congress of Brazil's historic National Student Union (UNE), held at the Federal
University of Minas Gerais. This congress marked UNE’s 60th anniversary, a cause for ritual celebration of UNE’s historic role in the country’s debates and struggles. Thousands of student delegates gathered in Belo Horizonte, representing department-based student organizations from universities around the country. Most students were also associated with national and local political factions linked to an array of left-of-center political parties. The congress began with high hopes from the contending camps. UNE’s governing faction (associated with the Communist Party of Brazil [PCdoB]) hoped to build bridges with rival factions and perhaps create a united mega-slate. An emergent alliance of left-wing parties and factions hoped to create a “unified front” of the left to contest control of UNE. And the moderate center-left factions hoped to expand their visibility and share of the leadership pie.

However most of these efforts fell through as the congress imploded, leaving all of the political forces except the communists split into pieces. Nearly a third of the registered delegates withdrew from the congress altogether in a dramaturgic display of public repudiation. Badges and banners were burned, T-shirts turned backwards, and angry drums resounded through the final plenary as furious delegates marched out of the stadium. Not only did the congress not end in unity (which no one had really expected), but it also resulted in the internal splintering of most of the forces and the rejection of the legitimacy of the congress altogether by a large proportion of the participants. While UNE was certainly not destroyed by this episode – it had too strong a position of symbolic and material value in the Brazilian political field – the near collapse of the congress intensified media critiques of UNE, left its scars on the contending factions, and contributed to a realignment of forces within the student movement.

Why did this political arena break down so dramatically? Why were the leaders unable to articulate the strong alliances that they had predicted so optimistically at the outset? And why did the tumultuous congress lead not simply to ideological and electoral polarization, but to the internal splitting of camps and mutual accusations of anti-democratic, morally unethical, and politically hypocritical behavior? In many of the postcongress internal discussions, this was chalked up to failures of “political skill” (habilidade política) on the part of leaders, who were not able to do the necessary “articulations” to stitch the expected alliances together. Social movement analysts might also note the importance of conjunctural factors having to do with the opportunities and constraints offered by the current political situation in Brazil. In particular, the liberalizing reforms of the social democratic president, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, created both polarizing
pressures and internal tensions for certain sectors of the left, contributing to the dilemmas and trade-offs at the congress.

While there are elements of truth to both leadership and conjunctural accounts, they miss key elements of the story. The near breakdown of the UNE congress in 1997 was not predetermined by the political conjuncture or a direct result of leadership failures; rather, the congress seemed to spin out of the hands of skilled, hard-working mediators at the last minute, leaving most of the participants stunned and chagrined. In contrast to these accounts, I argue that the unraveling of the congress was set in motion by the dilemmas generated by particular _styles_ of leadership and communication in volatile, fractally structured arenas. The emerging dispute over styles of political practice was, I suggest, even more symbolically potent than the dispute over ideology or agenda. These styles were shaped by the positioning of groups and factions in multi-organizational fields, as well as by the trajectories of leaders through overlapping institutional sectors. Leaders who were highly skilled in particular modes of communication – oriented toward cooperation or confrontation, ideas or actions – that had served them well in certain contexts had trouble adapting their skills to a rapidly changing political situation.

**The Fractal Structuring of Political Arenas**

Social movements – especially ones that transcend the local scale and begin heading toward various degrees of institutionalization – are internally complex and often fractious entities. As many scholars have noted, it can be difficult to delimit the boundaries of social movements, composed of participants with varying backgrounds, commitments, and organizational trajectories. Participants often flow in and out of movements over time as they juggle multiple commitments in activism and personal lives. The smaller, more homogenous and more intimate the movement (or movement group), the greater the chance it will generate a cohesive and solidaristic collective identity, as a number of recent scholars have shown (Friedman and McAdam, 1992; Polletta, 2002; Blee, 2012). As a movement expands, diversifies and institutionalizes its procedures, it also increases the possibility for ideological and stylistic contention and heightens the material and symbolic stakes involved in organizational leadership and control. Jasper (2004; 2006) calls this the “extension dilemma”; expansion brings many benefits but also some trade-offs in relation to unity and coherence.

While many scholars have noted that movements have internal divisions, less attention has been paid to the fact that movement factions themselves
are often internally divided. Parties and factions often have formal and informal subfactions, sometimes gravitating along fined-grained ideological distinctions, but just as often swirling out of more subtle commitments to particular leaders, friendship groups, local organizational histories, or styles of political practice (and at times, several of these interwoven together). Participant accounts of these subgroupings—often in terms of ideological and stylistic affinities—become the basis for the articulation of larger coalitions, caucuses, or institutionalized camps within a movement. These more visible alignments can take on symbolic, dramaturgic and regulatory lives of their own as a form of political discipline and mobilization, particularly when organizational control is at stake. But they often appear more stable and cohesive than they in fact are when you zoom the lens in more closely.

These divisions often have a fractal character: lower-level groupings and split mirror higher-level configurations, reflecting core organizing tensions and dilemmas that reverberate up and down a political arena. Abbott (2001) argues that such fractal divisions provide both change and stability; groups are always breaking down, but the concerns of the losing side are often appropriated by (or remapped onto) the dominant side. Dissident or hybrid groups reemerge, leading to further tension, generating cycles of split, conflict, and ingestion. Old ideas receive new formulations in successive cycles of debates, as core divisions are reconfigured in new alliance systems.

In political arenas such as those addressed in this book, such tensions become part of the strategic landscape. They provide opportunities for coalition-building and expansion (often via the appropriation of rival tactics and discourses), as well as the danger that one’s own coalition will dissolve or followers be attracted by a competing camp. Moreover, these tensions are only provisionally resolvable—and all resolutions involve trade-offs and sacrifices—which means that any reconfiguration generates new conflicts and dilemmas. In many social movement arenas, divisions between “moderates” and “radicals” (or between institutionalists and agitators, or between consensus-builders and combativos) cause tensions between and within camps, frequently generating further internal splits, hybridizations, or bridging efforts.

In the Brazilian case, the student arena was structured by the association of most of the delegates with political parties and organized factions, although these weren’t the only affiliations the students brought with them into the arena. Many of them participated in other kinds of activism (either concurrently or in the past), ranging from church-based popular movements in poor communities to labor unions, NGOs, anti-discrimination or-
ganizations, and professional associations. All voting delegates represented independent student associations (centros acadêmicos) based in university departments; the fact that they were elected “at the base” – rather than at lower-level regional congresses – became an important item of contention in the 1997 congress.

At stake in the congress was control of the directorate of the National Student Union (UNE), Brazil’s traditional student organization, which had a long and celebrated history going back to the 1930s. Many of Brazil’s politicians, judges, and other public leaders had wet their political feet in the historic organization, which prided itself on being present at the major moments in contemporary Brazilian history. After decades of repression by Brazil’s military dictatorship, UNE felt itself to be back on its feet, resuming its historic role in defining Brazil’s education policy and intervening in other civic questions of the day. At the same time, it had also been subjected to a barrage of recent criticisms in the media as well as from some student groups, which objected to what they saw as an overly partisan, adversarial climate, lack of attention to issues of racial and gender discrimination, and lack of internal democracy. Despite these criticisms, most student factions were heavily invested in competition for control of (or failing that, a seat in) UNE’s directorate. Leadership in UNE gave student activists a voice in higher education debates, along with a national media platform, access to infrastructure and resources, and a symbolic position from which to launch careers in a variety of political and professional arenas.

Partisan divisions within the student movement reflected alignments and oppositions in the larger political arena, including local and national governments as well as specialized sectors such as the labor movement. The 1997 UNE congress took place amid a deepening split in the left over how to respond to the liberalizing reforms of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, the sociologist turned politician who had been elected in 1994. Cardoso’s social democratic government made symbolic overtures toward civic organizations at the same time as it pursued policies of global economic integration, privatization, and institutional reform. This infuriated the radical left while moderates struggled over whether to participate in government-sponsored forums on education and other issues. These recurring conflicts reflect what Jasper (2006) calls the “radicalism” and “naughty or nice” dilemmas, with tendencies for radicalization and moderation each turned into symbolic virtues and deployed as means of distinction from opposing groups. This tension generated some of the mutual accusations of “appeasement” and “rigidity” that opposing camps of the student movement hurled at each other.
The major partisan alignments going into the 1997 congress are listed in Table 1. For most of the period since UNE’s postdictatorship reconstruction in 1979, UNE had been controlled by the youth of the Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB), with a short interval of control by the Workers’ Party (PT) from 1987 to 1991. The PT itself was divided by a complex system of formally recognized internal “tendencies”; in 1997 these could be grouped into alliances on the left and right of the party, themselves composed of several internal groups, each with their own leadership and base. On the far left side of the ideological spectrum were several radical Trotskyist factions, some organized as semi-autonomous tendencies within the PT (e.g., O Trabalho), while others constituted their own political parties (such as the PSTU [Partido Socialista dos Trabalhadores Unificado]). On the other end were a number of socialist, popular democratic and democratic labor parties, with their own loose alignments and internal tensions (PDT [Partido Democrático Trabalhista], PPS [Partido Popular Socialista], PCB [Partido Comunista Brasileiro]).

All of these “forces” (as they referred to themselves) considered themselves to be in opposition to Cardoso’s social democratic (PSDB) government. These partisan groupings in turn launched “theses” – often with colorful, stylistically resonant names – stating their initial platforms on issues related to national politics, educational policy, and the internal structure and procedures of the student movement. These “theses” were the starting point for the negotiation of electoral slates for UNE’s proportionally elected

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political parties/factions</th>
<th>Congressional “theses” and affiliation profiles</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communist Party of Brazil</td>
<td>“One Step In Front”: Deeply invested top and mid-level leadership involved in partisan, student and socialist organizations; looser but disciplined base.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(PCdoB). Controlled UNE from 1980-87 (after reconstruction) and since 1991</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workers’ Party (PT)</td>
<td>Right: “Pleasure in Transforming”: highly partisan top leadership; mid-level involvement in specialized/professional student movement; less deeply invested “festive” base. Left: “I Won’t AdapT”: Politically “dense” leadership with strong and deep overlap with student, labor, popular and professional movements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlled UNE from 1987-91; divided by complex system of internal “tendencies”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical Trotskyist parties</td>
<td>“Full Reverse” and “Not One More Day for FHC”: Deeply embedded militancy often involved in popular and labor movements in addition to student movement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(PSTU, O Trabalho)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist/Populist/Popular Democratic (PDT, PPS, PCB)</td>
<td>“Turning the Tables,” “Constructing the Future,” “I’m Crazy”: Student and partisan involvement with less cross-sectoral investment of base; some tendency toward clientelism.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
directorate. Most forces had a stronger chance of winning leadership slots through coalitions rather than running alone, although those coalitions were only settled through intensive negotiations over the course of the congress.

Modes of Communication and Stylistic Tensions

As Table 1 indicates, the political forces varied in internal composition, including in their members’ trajectories through and affiliations with other kinds of activism. As I have discussed in more detail elsewhere (Mische, 2008), these varying affiliation profiles contributed to important differences in their styles of political communication, with fractal tensions visible between and within camps. By styles, I refer to the performative dimension of political practice, that is, how participants communicate their identities, purposes, and relations in interaction settings (see Goffman, 1974; Goffman, 1981; Eliasoph, 1996; Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2003; Lichterman, 2012; Mische, 2008). Styles do not necessarily involve one singular, all-encompassing set of practices, but rather are composed of the ways in which people switch between what I call *modes of communication* – similar to what Goffman calls “footings” – in particular relational contexts.

Four important modes of communication in democratic politics are summarized in Table 2, organized along two dimensions (collaborative versus competitive and oriented toward ideas versus actions). I refer to these as exploratory dialogue, discursive positioning, reflective problem-solving, and tactical maneuver. We can see these four modes as finding justification in the ideas of Habermas, Gramsci, Dewey, and Machiavelli, respectively, at least as they have entered into practical political philosophy as it circulates within these (and other) movements. What I am calling a “style” refers to the patterned ways in which actors in particular institutional contexts emphasize, combine, avoid, and switch between these different communicative modes.

Each of these four modes represents a typified form of talk in group settings, as well as a valued model of political practice more generally. In addition, each has characteristic strengths and weaknesses, which can translate into dilemmas in political practice.² The choice to engage in any of these modes of communication involves trade-offs: more focus on open-ended dialogue may entail less ideological clarity or practical resolution; a fixation on resolving practical problems may entail less tactical flexibility or long-range transformative vision; strong assertion of identity and boundaries can
block possibilities for mutual learning and coalition-building; adeptness in negotiation and bargaining can lead to a loss of idealism and a cynical perception of one’s activism by oneself and others.

However, we should note that such performances are more than just freely exercised “choices”; they are also skills and routinized practices learned through previous trajectories through particular political and institutional contexts. Skills that serve people well in one context may fall flat in others, or leave them ill-equipped to deal with changing or emergent situations. Leaders may become locked into accustomed ways of responding to problems and challenges, finding it hard to see alternative forms of communication that might get them through an impasse.

Table 2  Discursive practices in four modes of communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideas</th>
<th>Collaboration</th>
<th>Competition</th>
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| EXPLORATORY DIALOGUE (Habermas) | - open-ended discussion, moving toward consensus  
- tentative, exploratory or experimental exchanges  
- attempts to draw the other out, understand what they mean  
- careful listening and subsequent rethinking of positions | DISCURSIVE POSITIONING (Gramsci) | - construction of boundaries: similarity and difference  
- articulation of subject position: as whom you are arguing  
- adversarial self-righteousness; moral-ethical critique  
- attempt to build camps and expand hegemony in field of ideas | |
| | STRENGTHS  
- allows oxygenation of ideas, considering other points of view | WEAKNESS:  
- tendency toward **idealism**: detached from practical and political consequences | |
| | WEAKNESSES  
- tendency toward **appeasement**: avoidance of conflict or dispute | |
| Actions | REFLECTIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING (Dewey) | TACTICAL MANEUVER (Machiavelli) |
| | - evaluation of strengths and weakness of historical experience  
- imaginative projection of possible future actions  
- weighing of group priorities: moral/practical consequences  
- consideration of values underlying both ends and means | - control and manipulation of information, symbols, and rhetoric  
- cost-benefit analysis of tactics and strategies  
- backstage bargaining over alliances, rules, and resources  
- frontstage displays of prestige and support  
- tactical adaptation and flexibility, valuing ends over means | |
| | STRENGTHS  
- contributes to institutional learning and collective adaptation to change | WEAKNESSES  
- tendency toward **cynicism**: second-guessing and breakdown of trust | |
| | WEAKNESSES  
- tendency toward **appeasement**: avoidance of conflict or dispute | |
Moreover, actors may become morally, emotionally and politically invested in a given stylistic orientation, so that any departure from it is seen as betrayal, hypocrisy, or lack of ethics. Jasper (2006) calls such commitments “tastes in tactics.” In fact, disputes that appear, on the surface, as disagreements over programs and alliances may more accurately revolve around questions of style, that is, the models of thought and action that actors think are (or should be) in play. The weaknesses that are inherent in a given style become grounds for ethical condemnation, with little acknowledgement of the strengths of the communicative practices involved.

Contending Styles among Partisan Forces

During the 1997 UNE congress, the contending forces had recognizably different stylistic orientations. While these styles were routinized and institutionalized in various ways, they were not static and fixed. Rather, many of the groups were undergoing a process of internal reevaluation of the practices that they considered to be ethically, politically, and institutionally desirable, generating fractal stylistic divisions within the groups. Figure 1 maps the major political forces onto the four communicative modes. The main locations of the forces in Figure 1 are based on history and reputation, while the arrows note their internal stylistic complexity, that is, the extent to which their members were engaging, or considering engaging, in modes

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EXPLORATORY DIALOGUE</td>
<td>Socialist/populist: (PDT, PPS, PSB)</td>
<td>TACTICAL MANEUVER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pleasure in Transforming (right PT)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>One Step in Front (PCdoB)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I Won’t AdaPT (left PT)</td>
<td></td>
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Figure 1 Fractal stylistic orientations among partisan forces
other than what was generally considered (by themselves and others) to be their dominant mode.

All the political forces had at least some fractal tendency toward the Machiavellian mode of tactical maneuver, concerned with seeking and maintaining institutional control. This was primarily represented through their top-level leaders, who were most invested in the contest for control of the national student organizations, but students at all levels who engaged in local leadership contests had a taste of this. The institutional structure of the UNE congresses supported (and even demanded) this mode, since leaders had to dedicate a good part of their energies to tactical alliance-building, backstage bargaining, and frontstage displays of symbolic power in the battle for control of the organization. Not all of the mid-level or “base” activists were as invested in the struggle for institutional control; some were downright scornful of the strongly adversarial, sectarian orientation of the student movement. At times they were even suspicious of their own leaders, whom they suspected of “selling out” the ideological and/or stylistic orientation of the group in the interest of political “opportunism” or projects of political self-promotion.

In their primary positioning, the right and left camps of the PT tended to gravitate toward the upper two quadrants (focused on ideas), while the socialists and communists gravitated toward the lower half (focused on actions). While all factions created their platforms with care, the debate over ideas among PT activists had an organic vigor that I did not see in most other camps. Within the PT (as well as in some Trotskyist groups, many of which were or had been associated with the PT), any individual or group could develop and circulate their “texts” without the top-down centralism of the more traditional left. However, PT activists differed in their emphasis on the consensual or adversarial character of ideas. In the left wing of the PT and the Trotskyist groups in particular, ideological positioning was taken very seriously (often with left-flank pressure toward even more ideological clarity and consistency). The right wing of the PT had more of a tendency toward ideological looseness, with a stronger commitment to open-ended dialogue and consensus-building (and had right-flank pressure toward even more of a dialogic orientation in order to attract less ideological recruits at the base).

In contrast, the socialists and communists focused more on the pragmatic and tactical modes. For the socialist and populist groups in the lower left quadrant, this meant a stronger emphasis on civic participation and institution-building. While all parties were critical of the Cardoso government, for example, most of the socialist/populist camp advocated participat-
ing in the education councils initiated by federal and local governments as a pragmatic means of influencing change from within the system (a position vigorously opposed by the left-wing groupings as co-optation and/or selling out). The right wing of the PT was ambivalent about these kinds of state-sponsored forums but had more civic-institutionalist leanings, while the PCdoB saw such institutional participation as tactically important in order to establish a foothold in the apparatus of power. While the communists were seen by most of the other groups as oriented toward Machiavellian scheming (“they’ll do anything to win”), they had recently begun to make overtures in more dialogic and institution-building directions. They were concerned with what they called the “governability” of UNE, and were trying to engage the other factions in a constructive and integrative manner so as to reduce the adversarial climate within the organization. However this was a recent development and not well trusted by the other forces, which still saw the PCdoB as focused on achieving institutional control at any cost.

**Dilemmas of Alliance-Building**

Styles are often important for relations-building, providing reasons for and against forming collaborations or alliances with other groups. Perceived weaknesses in communicative styles can be used as ethical and political weapons to discredit opponents. For example, the left PT activists associated with *I Won’t AdaPT* condemned the PCdoB as cynical, manipulative and authoritarian (i.e., Machiavellian), as well as willing to appease the forces of the right through its pragmatic stress on civic institutionalism. While they were not quite as harshly critical of *Pleasure in Transforming*, they were openly scornful of what they saw as their copartisans’ stylistic weakness; in their eyes, the right of the PT was ideologically mushy, overly idealistic, and lacking in combativity, as a result of its anti-dogmatic embrace of exploratory dialogue.

In contrast, the leaders of *Pleasure in Transforming* saw these same practices as demonstrating the stylistic virtues of their own group: a concern with open dialogue and practical institution-building (as opposed to rigid ideological critique) as well as stronger attention to the personal learning and reflective experiences of their members. In these cases, styles become the metonymic stand-in for groups, in the symbolic shorthand that constitutes players within arenas (see Polletta, 2006).

These mutual stylistic evaluations played an important role in the strategic dilemmas of alliance-building that emerged at the congress. Figure 2
The PCdoB officially wanted to encompass everyone in a “unified slate,” although this was generally considered to be impossible. *Pleasure in Transforming* seemed happy to include the socialists, uneasy in relation to the PCdoB, dubious about the left of the PT, and opposed to the radical Trotskyists. The left of the PT (*I Won’t Adapt*) was hoping to construct a “united front of the left” in alliance with the Trotskyist groups; they categorically excluded the socialists and the PCdoB (on ideological and ethical grounds, respectively) and were conditionally open to the right of the PT (“if they decide that they are of the left”). The Trotskyists were willing to include all of the PT and the PCdoB, but under no terms would they ally with the socialists (the “parties of the right”). The socialists, in turn, rejected an alliance with the ideological left, openly courted the right wing of the PT, and were open but uneasy in relation to the PCdoB.

Given these opening tactical predispositions, there were a number of different ways the forces could have settled into electoral slates, depending on interforce negotiations. Note, however, how this configuration generates particular dilemmas and cross-pressures for *Pleasure in Transforming*. All of the forces, in effect, declared themselves willing to include the right of the PT in their coalitions; yet all of their potential allies (except for the PCdoB) had restrictions against its other potential partners (i.e., the left of

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**Figure 2** Possible “arcs of alliances” among UNE forces

![Diagram](image-url)
the PT rejected the socialists, the socialists rejected the left of the PT and the Trotskyists, and everyone else was uneasy, if not downright hostile, toward the PCdoB).

Moreover, any of the alliances could be perceived by the activists within *Pleasure in Transforming* as an ideological, organizational, or ethical self-betrayal. If they allied with the left of the PT, they would betray many of their own proposals, which tended to place more stock in institutional change – and less on class confrontation – than their copartisans. If they allied with the socialists, they risked accusations of partisan betrayal for siding with the “parties of the right.” And if they allied with the communists, they risked ethical self-betrayal, given their historic condemnation of the style and method of the PCdoB. While the camp leaders enjoyed being courted in the early phase of the congress, these dilemmas intensified over the next few days as the negotiations developed.

### Positioning and Negotiation

Some of these tensions were visible in the physical positioning of the forces in the collective space of the congress. All the major plenaries took place in a large sports arena near the university, with the contending forces arrayed in the bleachers in a semi-circle facing the platform with speakers

*Figure 3*  The positioning of forces in the major plenary sessions

![Diagram of the positioning of forces in the major plenary sessions](image-url)
and presiding student leaders at the front. For the most part, the seating arrangements were traditional, with the more left-wing forces on the left side of the stadium, the socialists and independents in the middle, and the reigning PCdoB on the right side.

This year, however, an important difference in the seating arrangement at the opening plenary signaled the potential realignments in play. The youth in Pleasure in Transforming were seated around the right curve, between the socialists and the PCdoB, a departure from this group’s usual position further left, next to their copartisans in the left of the PT. The physical separation of Pleasure in Transforming from the rest of the PT, along with the proximity to the PCdoB, signaled the heightened climate of factional dispute within the PT as well as the new spirit of collaboration with the PCdoB, at least among top leaders. However, the grassroots delegates associated with Pleasure in Transforming had a marked tendency (infuriating to the leadership) to disperse around the stadium, perhaps reflecting their weaker ideological commitment as well as their discomfort at this unusual location next to the PCdoB.

This stadium was the location of the major deliberative plenary sessions, in which the congress voted on proposals in three main areas: the National and International Conjuncture, the University, and the Student Movement. The proposals were gathered through discussion groups, organized by a “systematization committee,” and boiled down to consensual vs. nonconsensual resolutions. Most resolutions were consensual, requiring simply a blanket mass approval. However, in the controversial areas, contending proposals were hotly defended in speeches by top leaders, accompanied by dramaturgical displays of support and repudiation.

The 1997 congress witnessed an especially heated debate about UNE’s position on national alliances, that is, on whether to advocate a broad “democratic and popular” front in opposition to neoliberalism and the Cardoso government, or whether to support a class-based alliance for a “government of the workers,” which would “unify students and workers, of the country and city.” The “broad front” proposal was supported by the PCdoB, the right of the PT and the socialist bloc, while the “classist front” proposal was supported by the left of the PT and the radical Trotskyists. Votes on these platform issues, in turn, were used to measure the relative strength of the forces in the final dispute of leadership slates and thus to determine coalitional strategies. In the opening plenary, the “broad front” proposal won by a surprisingly small margin, intensifying the left-wing camps’ perception that they were within reach of a historic consolidation of the “class-based” left.
Over the five days of the congress, the negotiations within and between the camps were intense. Sometimes these took the form of small leadership meetings in back rooms, while at other times they consisted of internal plenaries in which delegates could debate and vote on their groups’ proposals and alliances. Top-level leaders were constantly shuttling between these internal discussions and their negotiations with leaders of other forces. Some of these internal plenaries did little more than approve the leadership accords worked out behind the scenes, while others (particularly those of the PT) had lively, contentious debates.

Within the Pleasure in Transforming camp the debates were particularly anguished, as participants considered which among their contending “suitors” they should ally with in the final slate (or alternatively, whether they were strong enough to go it alone and still gain a leadership slot in UNE’s directorate). Tensions between state delegations as well as between top and mid-level leaders were beginning to appear, particularly in relation to the possibility of forming an alliance with the communists. Those in favor of allying with the PCdoB – mostly national and São Paulo leaders – argued that the alliance was important to combat sectarianism, dogmatism and ideological rigidity in the student movement. Those opposed – particularly mid-level leaders engaged in state and local disputes with the PCdoB – said it would be a betrayal of their historical critique of what they saw as the manipulative and cynical political practice of the communists.

Note the critique of style as a justification for (or against) particular alliance strategies, and in defense of a particular group self-conception: “we” should choose partners who are neither dogmatic nor cynical. Allying with the socialists was one solution to this dilemma, although it meant splitting further with their copartisans in the left of the PT, painful to many at the base. And some of the top leaders (as good Machiavellians) worried that joining with the socialists would give them a less powerful position in UNE’s directorate than an alliance with the PCdoB.

Confrontation and Crisis

By the second major plenary session, on the afternoon of the fourth day, it looked like alliances were coming into focus. The forces of the left – *I Won’t AdaPT, Full Reverse, Not One More Day* – were on the verge of settling an accord for a unified slate of the “classist” left, with a few thorny details on the distribution of leadership positions still to be worked out. Meanwhile, *Pleasure in Transforming* was engaged in heavy flirtation with the social-
ists and independents, dramatized by wearing each other’s stickers and intermingling in the bleachers to a joyful dance beat. Leaders reported that a tentative agreement between these forces had been reached, which was a relief to many Pleasure activists who had been wary of an alliance with the PCdoB. Meanwhile the PCdoB, confident of its own numerical dominance, continued negotiations for a unified slate even as it won every vote, joined on nearly all of them by the right of the PT. Before the day was through, however, this nearly settled configuration of forces erupted into confrontation and crisis, as the contingencies of the evening triggered the fractures between and within nearly all of the opposition forces.

What brought the crisis to a head was a controversial proposal by the youth of the PCdoB to change the rules of the game. They proposed changing the election of delegates to UNE’s national congress to a “funnel” procedure, in which UNE delegates would be elected in prior regional congresses, rather than elected directly in “base” student organizations in university departments. The PCdoB claimed that it was adopting a historic proposal of the PT for the democratization of the student movement, a claim hotly contested by the left of the PT. The left saw the proposal as an attack on the democracy of the student movement and an attempt to “distance UNE even more from the students” through smaller, more manipulable regional congresses. The PCdoB argued that smaller regional congresses would allow for a higher quality of political discussion and problem-solving than was possible in the current huge and sprawling national congress.

Note the dispute over style: the left argued that the proposal smacked of Machiavellian manipulation, while the PCdoB declared that it would turn UNE toward Deweyian deliberation. Here we see a vivid reflection of the “rules” dilemma (Jasper, 2006), in which efforts to change an arena end up embroiled in the rules of that same arena. The student opposition from the PT had been trying for over a decade to change the electoral process within UNE, through proposals for direct elections, regional congresses, and more inclusion of “course-based” organizations (a PT stronghold). While these proposals were defended in the name of “democracy,” PT activists clearly thought these reforms would provide an advantage for their own (more mass-based) approach to politics. The PCdoB successfully resisted these proposals, and the PT was forced to play by existing rules in order to enjoy the material and symbolic benefits of UNE directorship. However, at the 1997 congress, the PCdoB itself attempted to change the rules by claiming that it was appropriating the ideas of the opposition. (In fact, the PCdoB’s “funnel” proposal was quite different from original PT plan for regional congresses, which would have maintained direct elections at the
base.) In the ambiguity and surprise at the stealthily launched proposal, the motives of the PCdoB were called into question, exemplifying the “sincerity” dilemma, in which appearances, reputation and motives may clash. As a result, the proposal for rule change was denounced as an anti-democratic coup rather than as a genuinely democratizing move.

The vote was called, following heated denunciations from the podium by most of the opposition leaders (with the exception of Pleasure in Transforming, which was oddly silent, despite the fact that it was the only force that had a proposal for regional congresses as part of its precongress platform). As UNE officials began counting badges raised for and against the measure, drums began rolling, chants were pounding, and the whole plenary underwent a shift. The socialist and independent delegates began to migrate toward the left of the stadium in order to join the left-wing forces and display a stronger density of votes against the measure. Meanwhile, the PCdoB delegates were shepherded into a more concentrated position on the right side to show votes in favor. The call “True delegates, elected by the base!” resounded from the left side of the stadium from the PSTU all the way over to the PPS, with the two percussion sections of these usually opposing groups exuberantly joining forces. The new configuration in the arena is depicted in Figure 4.

At this point Pleasure in Transforming entered into crisis. Their delegates had in fact approved the proposal for regional congresses in their internal

Figure 4 Shifts in the plenary: vote on regional congresses
plenary earlier in the day, as part of an accord with the PCdoB. However at this dramatic moment, the vote took on other proportions, which superseded the merits of the proposal itself. This was the principal polarizing moment of the congress, the one slight chance that the unified opposition might have to defeat the PCdoB. Even if they lost, it was a dramaturgic chance to deliver a general repudiation of the politics of the PCdoB in the student movement. As such, some of the orange-shirted *Pleasure in Transforming* activists began to move left toward the rest of the opposition.

This evoked a storm of protest among the *Pleasure* leaders, who tried to discipline their base to move right toward the PCdoB. An anguished and angry discussion ensued in the bleachers, while the left side of the stadium joined in chanting “Come over here, *Pleasure in Transforming*!” The left of the PT further escalated the pressure by pushing the party loyalty button with the classic PT chant, “Party, party, is of the workers!” PCdoB leaders swooped over to see what the problem was, as the right of the PT huddled in furious debate, strongly worded in terms of loyalty and betrayal. With many of the delegates nearly in tears, the top *Pleasure* leaders finally agreed to release their group members to vote their conscience and discuss it afterwards. At this point the huddle erupted and split into two parts, as half went to join the opposition and half entered the bleachers occupied by the PCdoB.

The proposal for regional congresses was approved by a very small margin. As the vote was announced, another sea change began in the stadium. The delegates of *I Won’t AdaPT* started filing out of the arena in protest, as the stadium echoed with their ominous chant, “True delegates, elected at the base!” The radical Trotskyists in *Full Reverse* were furious at their allies’ departure from the plenary, as they needed their support on a couple of critical votes ahead. “Stay to fight!” they chanted to their own furious drumroll.3

What followed was a long night of tense negotiations within and between the various opposition forces. The internal PT tendencies that composed *I Won’t AdaPT* were strongly divided about whether or not to exit the congress altogether and thus give up their chance at positions in UNE’s directorate. While all factions denounced the “authoritarian coup” of the funnel proposal, there was passionate disagreement about whether to break definitively with the practices of the PCdoB and rebuild the student movement at the grassroots level, or stay within the historic student organization to try to build the “front of the left” from within. Here we see echoes of the “engagement” dilemma, and its flip side, what we might call the “exit” dilemma, as cogently described by Hirschman (1970). Jasper (2006) discusses
these dilemmas in terms of the trade-offs involved in “switching arenas.” Actors may move to a new arena when blocked, or in order to “signal the seriousness of the interaction or conflict,” but this removes them from the local strategic advantages that come from “being there” in the original arena of conflict.

Within *Pleasure in Transforming*, emotions ran equally high about whether or not the group should enter into alliance with the communists, especially now that the socialist factions had angrily withdrawn from the near-settled alliance as a result of *Pleasure’s* “accord” with the PCdoB. They didn’t have the numbers to make it into UNE’s executive by going out alone, and the top leaders were determined to secure the vice presidency or another top position. However, the mid-level *Pleasure* leaders felt betrayed by the top-level negotiations and argued that they could not possibly defend an alliance with the PCdoB back in their home states and universities.

There were several other twists and turns in this drama over the course of that night and the next morning, but the upshot was further fragmentation and splintering. *Pleasure in Transforming* held an anguished late-night vote that narrowly tipped against the alliance with the PCdoB, causing angry protests against sectarianism by its right-flank leaders. However this vote was overturned the next morning in an internal plenary that approved the alliance with the communists, sparking a fistfight and furious withdrawal by a group of mid-level leaders. In the final plenary of the congress, this dis-sident *Pleasure* group entered the stadium with their orange shirts turned backwards (painted with the slogans “For ethics in UNE” and “I won’t sell myself”) and burned a group flag in repudiation of their own leadership.

After several equally tense internal plenaries, *I Won’t AdaPT* voted by a very close margin to exit the congress, which they did with dramaturgical flourish that included parading back into the stadium with chanted denunciations and the burning of badges by some delegates. However, the losing factions within *I Won’t AdaPT* continued to have deep misgivings about the withdrawal; soon after the congress they split with the rest of the camp and ended up entering UNE’s directorate through backstage negotiations. The withdrawal from the congress was furiously repudiated by *Full Reverse*, which shouted, “UNE in struggle, opposition, down with division!” as their near-allies made their final exit from the stadium. The Trotskyists launched their own slate and were strong enough to win an opposition slot in the executive. Several of the socialist parties also withdrew from the congress in protest, while small splinter groups from each of these joined what remained of *Pleasure in Transforming* in a broad but shallow alliance with the PCdoB. To no one’s surprise, the communist-led slate won once
again, and the PCdoB continued in firm control of UNE, with *Pleasure in Transforming* gaining the vice presidency as a condition of the alliance.

**Dilemmas of Style in Fractal Arenas**

How can we account for the tumultuous ending and near breakdown of the 1997 congress? Why did almost every force at the congress end up fractured (with the exception of the PCdoB)? To understand this breakdown, I argue that it is not enough to examine only environmental or conjunctural factors. While the larger political situation generated some initial divisions and cross-pressures, we further our understanding of the crisis by looking at communicative processes among players within the (literal and figurative) arena of the congress.

These processes were driven in turn by fractal divisions and subdivisions along both ideological and stylistic lines. While most factions were associated with a "dominant" mode of communication (oriented toward exploratory dialogue, discursive positioning, reflective problem-solving or tactical maneuver), in fact most of them had several different modes in the mix, generated in part by the multiple affiliations and leadership positions of their members. These stylistic orientations, in turn, constrained the mediating skills of particular leaders as they attempted to respond strategically to the emerging crisis, generating painful dilemmas and trade-offs. Notably, the leaders of *Pleasure in Transforming* and *I Won’t AdaPT* were both criticized for lack of "habilidade política," that is, political ability, or what I call skill. In both cases their well-honed skills in mediation, while effective in other venues, were limited both by their habitualized practices and by their political and ethical commitments to particular modes of communication.

The most stylistically divided of the forces at the conferences was *Pleasure in Transforming*. As we have seen, there were stylistic tensions between top-, mid-, and low-level leaders, as well as between the different internal PT tendencies within the group, some of which veered in either more pragmatic-institutionalist or more dialogic-exploratory directions. They united in condemning what they saw as the narrow sectarianism and ideological rigidity of the traditional left (i.e., its reliance on Gramscian positioning) as well as the Machiavellian maneuver that they associated with the PCdoB. Nevertheless, while politically and ethically condemning these two competitive modes, they were drawn into them as well. The institutional structure of UNE demanded skill in tactical maneuver to...
win space in the directorate, especially among the higher level leaders. Moreover, many mid-level *Pleasure* activists were concerned to show that they weren’t just naïve idealists or pragmatic accommodators, but could be combative and dispute hegemony as well (the “naughty or nice” dilemma). This contributed to their angry, principled break with their own top leadership.

However, *Pleasure*’s leaders were less skilled in discursive positioning and tactical maneuver than their counterparts in *I Won’t AdaPT* and the PCdoB, and these stylistic weaknesses undermined their ability to respond to the crisis. While exploratory dialogue allows for exchange of ideas and consideration of other points of view, it can be difficult to reach closure on political projects (and when such closure is required, it tends to be vague, idealistic, and ambiguous). This can contribute to the dispersion of ideas and people, as well as to a lack of commitment to positions. In this case, the base *Pleasure* delegates were so uncommitted to their own proposal for regional congresses that they abandoned it in a flash when cross-cutting partisan pressures besieged the group. Moreover, the group’s nonhierarchical, pleasure-oriented ethic also undermined collective discipline in “marshalling the troops,” a key component of the PCdoB’s repeated electoral success. As a result of these weaknesses in positioning and maneuver, dispersion was a chronic problem for *Pleasure in Transforming*, perhaps more than for any other force.

Within *I Won’t AdaPT*, the stylistic tension was different. The camp as a whole took its discursive positioning extremely seriously, debating ideological proposals thoroughly in order to build cohesion and commitment throughout the camp. They spent most of the congress repudiating the Deweyian idea of bringing all of the forces of UNE into one big institutional tent, but rather worked hard to consolidate a clear boundary between the “classist” left (themselves and the radical Trotskyists) and the “forces of the right” (the communists, socialists, and social democrats). As a result of this intense effort in ideological and stylistic boundary work, the base of *I Won’t AdaPT* entered the congress with more commitment (and hence, less ideological or interpersonal dispersion) than *Pleasure in Transforming*.

However, this highly ideological mode also involved trade-offs that played a role in the congressional crisis. *I Won’t AdaPT*’s strongly adversarial positioning helped to generate intra-camp cohesion, but it contributed to inflexible and absolutist evaluations of the other forces (a variation on the “Janus” dilemma, in which internal radicalism makes external communication difficult). They dismissed the proposal for regional “funnel”
congresses as anti-democratic, completely rejecting the PCdoB's contention that this would allow for a higher quality of discussion. Rather, they saw the proposal as a cynical attempt at manipulation that needed to be ethically and politically repudiated. While there was probably some grounds for this skepticism, it meant that they were not willing to admit or engage the PCdoB's new (admittedly partial and tentative) receptivity to dialogue and problem-solving in relation to the structural problems of the student movement. Instead, they decided to radicalize their critique of the anti-democratic tendencies of UNE and exit the arena altogether, much to the chagrin of some of their own members and allies.

In these ways, the trade-offs built in to the dominant styles of *Pleasure in Transforming* and *I Won't AdaPT* helped to undermine their projects and alliances. While *Pleasure* leaders stressed exploratory dialogue, these conversations were often idealized, ambiguous, and open-ended, and their pragmatic tendencies left them vulnerable to accusations of appeasement. In contrast, *I Won't AdaPT* leaders were more adept at discursive positioning, but this reduced their tactical flexibility in a moment of crisis.

These kinds of stylistic tensions and limitations were also evident in the PCdoB. The PCdoB was experimenting with a new, hybrid repertoire that maintained the party's well-honed skills in tactical maneuver and hard-nosed institutional control, while cultivating more pragmatic and dialogic relations with other groups. They understood this as a response to their critics and as an appropriation of some of the stylistic qualities of other groups. The lack of trust from other forces toward their new approach shows the inherent weakness of the Machiavellian mode, which tends to engender cynicism about motive and method. At the same time, the PCdoB contributed to the breakdown in communication through its own weak skills in cross-partisan articulation. The communist leaders' forays into dialogue and problem-solving were still so tentative that they did not adequately discuss their reform proposals with the other forces. Afterwards, the leaders seemed bewildered and exasperated at the accusation that this was a last-minute coup. Clearly, the PCdoB did not exercise the mediating skills that might have allowed the contentious vote to go forward without blowing the congress apart.

In all of these cases, it was not simply lack of skills that was the problem; all of the leading players were highly skilled, committed activists. Rather the skills themselves contained the seeds of their own undoing. Stylistic proclivities and tensions generated strategic dilemmas for factional leaders, at the same time as they channeled the leaders' responses to the emerging crisis. The leaders' adeptness in (and political-ethical commitment to) particular styles of communication – as well as internal stylistic tension within the camps – con-
tributed to the breakdown in communication and the fracturing of alliances and subgroups, along with the disruption of the UNE congress as a whole.

Lessons and Cycles

As Abbott (2001) has noted, fractal divisions contribute to both stability and change, via the mechanisms of appropriation, hybridization, dissidence and coalition formation. The tumultuous ending of the 1997 congress did not destroy the student movement, nor most of the factions involved. The “classist left” – including both those who exited and those who “stayed to fight” – reconfigured and within a few years had overturned the proposal for a funnel congress and consolidated its strength as an opposition force in the student movement. At a higher level in the fractally structured field, the alliance between the right of the PT and the PCdoB at the 1997 student congress contributed to the institutionalist coalition that elected President Lula a few years later. In counterreaction, a segment of the leftist factions withdrew from the PT altogether and formed their own political party, out of disillusionment with the policies and practices of the “moderate” President Lula. And so the fractal cycle continues.

For the purposes of this volume, the important lesson here is that fractal subdivisions within political arenas generate persistent dilemmas that can only be provisionally resolved with each new configuration of alliances and power relations. I have argued that these divisions are not just ideological, but also stylistic, shaped by shifting orientations toward collaboration and competition, or toward ideas and actions. Those divisions reappear in successive cycles or waves – in part because each of the four modes of communications that I have described has characteristic strengths and weaknesses. Their strengths solve some political problems but generate others; their weaknesses invite repudiation and critique. Innovation often comes through hybridization and bridging efforts, but these can be thwarted by their own histories and routines. Losing sets of ideas and practices often revive within or outside of the dominant force, generating new challenges, dilemmas, and realignments. In this way, political arenas that seem stretched to the breaking point regenerate in new forms, yet bearing the same core tensions and dilemmas.

Notes

1. This chapter adapts, condenses and theoretically reformulates some of the ethnographic material presented in Chapter 9 of Ann Mische, *Partisan Pub-
These modes reflect many of the dilemmas described by Jasper (2006). The Machiavellian mode involves an intertwining of the Dirty Hands and Sincerity dilemmas, while the Gramscian mode reflects some of the trade-offs involved in the Articulation and Radicalism dilemmas. The Deweyian and Habermasian modes both run some of the risks of the Universalism, Extension and Whose Goals dilemmas, with the Deweyian mode also reflecting the flip side of the Naughty or Nice trade-off and the Habermasian the flip side of Articulation. Many of these dilemmas are reflected in the account that follows.

3. The translation of these chants loses the resonant rhyming of the Portuguese wordplay. The four chants noted above consisted of the following: “Venha para cá, Prazer em Transformar!”; “Partido, partido, é dos trabalhadores!”; “Delegado, de verdade, eleito pela base!” and “Fica pra lutar!”

References


