

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-00155-7 - Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics

Ronald R. Aminzade, Jack A. Goldstone, Doug McAdam, Elizabeth J. Perry, William H. Sewell,
Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly

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Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics

The aim of this book is to highlight and begin to give “voice” to some of the notable “silences” evident in recent years in the study of contentious politics. Specifically, the authors offer agenda-setting chapters on the following important, yet underrepresented, topics: emotion, temporality, the spatial dimensions of contention, leadership, threat as a stimulus to contention, religion, and demographic and life-course processes. In doing so, they also provide a partial synthesis of various literatures that have grown up around the study of non-routine or contentious politics. As such, the book not only undermines conventional disciplinary understanding of contentious politics, but also lays out a number of provocative new research agendas.

Ronald R. Aminzade is Professor of Sociology at the University of Minnesota, St. Paul. His publications include *Ballots and Barricades* (1993), winner of the Contribution to Scholarship Award of the Political Sociology Section of the American Sociological Association.

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Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics

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Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*

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To Fresh Voices:

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Preface

The publication of *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics* marks an end to one aspect of a unique collaborative project that began in the early 1990s and stretched into the new millennium. Ultimately, the project came to involve twenty-one core participants and a host of others who attended one or more of the nine miniconferences that structured the project. In form and function, the project resembled nothing so much as an extended, collaborative conversation concerning the nature and dynamics of “contentious politics.”

Motivated by a shared concern that the study of social movements, revolutions, democratization, ethnic conflict, and other forms of nonroutine, or contentious, politics had grown fragmented, spawning a number of insular scholarly communities only dimly aware of one another, the project was committed above all else to exploring possible lines of synthesis – empirical and theoretical – that might transcend some of the scholarly conventions that still largely divide the field. Among these conventions are: persistent theoretical divisions between rationalists, culturalists, and structuralists; putative differences between various forms of contention (for example, social movements, revolutions, peasant rebellions, industrial conflict, and so on); and the longstanding assumption of area specialists that any general phenomenon – such as contentious politics – can only be understood in light of the idiosyncratic history and cultural conventions of the locale in which it takes place. While respectful of these conventional distinctions, the project has been committed to exploring their limits and embracing promising new approaches and topics in the study of political contention.

A bit of history: The project began in 1993 with a casual conversation between Sid Tarrow and me, in which we found we shared a deep

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ambivalence regarding the proliferation of work on social movements. On the one hand, we were delighted that a topic long regarded as peripheral by political scientists and sociologists alike had come to be seen as a legitimate subject of so much academic work. On the other, we were concerned by the increasing narrowness of the field and its disconnect from other “proximate” fields of study. Wouldn’t it be great, we mused, if scholars from these separate fields could together explore the possibilities for synthesis across these nominally distinct subfields? In turn, the conversation led to a concrete suggestion: Why not submit a proposal to the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences to convene a one-year Special Project devoted to the kind of exploration and synthesis we had in mind? Why not, indeed! After enlisting Chuck Tilly as a third coconspirator, a proposal was drafted, ably vetted by Phil Converse and Bob Scott (then Director and Associate Director of the Center), and in 1994 approved by both the Center’s Advisory Committee on Special Projects and its Board of Trustees.

Having secured the Special Project, the enterprise then took a fateful and felicitous turn. Knowing how ambitious – yet amorphous – our aims were, Bob Scott encouraged us to seek the additional monetary support that would allow us to stretch the project over a longer time frame. At his suggestion, we made application in 1995 to the Mellon Foundation’s Sawyer Seminar Series seeking support for a three-year seminar series organized around the broad topic of “Contentious Politics.” To our delight, Mellon granted the request.

The challenge now centered on finding the right core faculty around whom to build the ongoing conversation. Eventually, we were lucky enough to attract four other colleagues who are our coauthors on this book. In Ron Aminzade, Jack Goldstone, Liz Perry, and Bill Sewell, we could not have asked for more qualified and generous conversationalists. (Speaking personally, the opportunity to interact with all six of these colleagues over the life of the project has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my career. None of them can possibly know just how much I have learned and continue to learn from them.)

Though neither our Center nor our Mellon “sponsors” required us to do so, the seven of us agreed immediately that we wanted to involve graduate students in the project. Who better to offer fresh perspectives on important topics than promising young scholars not wedded to disciplinary boundaries and subfield conventions? The model we hit on for facilitating student involvement in the project was a yearly competition to

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select five Graduate Fellows drawn from applications solicited nationally from across a range of social science disciplines. The results of our first competition confirmed the approach. The voices of the five members of that first graduate “cohort” – Lissa Bell, Pamela Burke, Robyn Eckhardt, John Glenn, and Joseph Luders – blended so seamlessly into the conversation that, in the end, they forced us to revise our plan to limit the Fellowships to one year and to approach Mellon for funding to enable us to retain all Graduate Fellows for the life of the project. Mellon came through for us a second time. Nine more talented students – Jorge Cadena-Roa, David Cunningham, Manali Desai, Debbie Gould, Hyojoung Kim, Heidi Swarts, Nella Van Dyke, Heather Williams, and Kim Williams – joined us over the next two years, bringing the total number of Graduate Fellows on the project to fourteen. It is to these fourteen that we have dedicated the volume. It was their many interventions, provocative queries, and fresh takes on familiar topics, as much as anything, that inspired the exploratory focus and tone of this volume. We thank them collectively for their innumerable contributions to the book and broader Mellon/Center project.

There are many others we need to thank as well. To do so, it will help to know something about the way the broad project was structured. In each of the three years of the Mellon project (1995–96, 1996–97, and 1997–98) we organized three two-day miniconferences, each focused on a specific topic relevant to a general understanding of contention. Among the topics explored in these sessions were: religion and contention, emotion and contention, the globalization of contention, identity and networks in contention, and the like. Besides the grad fellows and core faculty, each of these conferences featured participation by two to three “invited experts” on the specific topic of the gathering. We owe these colleagues a deep vote of thanks as well. Many of the ideas pursued in these chapters benefited from insights gleaned from this or that “conversational guest.” A complete list of these distinguished colleagues follows: Mark Beissinger, Craig Calhoun, Bill Gamson, Jeff Goodwin, Roger Gould, Susan Harding, Michael Hechter, Lynn Hunt, Jane Jenson, Arthur Kleinman, Hanspeter Kriesi, Marc Lichbach, John Meyer, Ann Mische, Aldon Morris, Mary-jane Osa, Gay Seidman, Kathryn Sikkink, Verta Taylor, Mark Traugott, Paul Wapner, and Timothy Wickham-Crowley.

In addition to the three miniconferences held during year three of the project, four of the core faculty – Ron Aminzade, Sid Tarrow, Chuck Tilly, and I – constituted a Special Project on Contentious Politics while in residence at the Center. Besides meeting extensively as a closed group, we

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also organized a general seminar on the topic for interested Center Fellows. Once again, we were lucky to attract the attention of an unusually large and talented group of our colleagues. These Center colleagues included: Jerry Davis, Jenny Mansbridge, James McPherson, Rob Sampson, Carol Swain, Ed Tiryakian, and Katherine Verdery.

A fourth group of colleagues intervened more directly in the content of the volume. These were friends who read and gave us generous feedback on one or more chapters of the book. These academic samaritans included: Neil Brenner, Kathy Simon Frank, Scott Gartner, Debbie Gould, John Hall, Clyde Hertzman, Stuart Hill, Lynn Hunt, Howard Kimeldorf, Bert Klandermands, Theodore Kemper, David Laitin, Erik Larson, Barbara Laslett, Richard Madsen, Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer Pierce, Ed Tiryakian, Mark Traugott, and Lisa Weeden. Another colleague, Yang Su, labored long and hard to discharge a host of editorial matters connected with the volume. I owe him a personal debt of gratitude for all his help.

We have reserved two very special institutional acknowledgments for last. We refer, of course, to our two institutional sponsors, who responded creatively and generously to our requests for support. To the Mellon Foundation, and Harriet Zuckerman in particular, we offer a very sincere vote of thanks for their creative stewardship of the project. Without Mellon funds we simply would never have been able to undertake such a unique and ambitious project.

And then there is the enormous debt of gratitude we owe the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. It was the prospect of a Center Special Project that set us in motion in the first place. It was Bob Scott's vision of a longer-term project that motivated us to approach Mellon for support. It was the consistent support of two Center Directors – Phil Converse and later Neil Smelser – that sustained the project over the long term. And, we are convinced, it was the special quality of the Center experience that allowed the larger Mellon group to grow so close over the life of the project. We therefore salute the entire Center staff for their critical role in the success of the enterprise. More prosaically, much of the work on the volume was carried out at the Center, either as part of the Special Project or in connection with the various miniconferences held there between 1995 and 1998.

It remains only to say a few words about the volume itself. How did *Silence* come about? Interestingly, I had drawn up an outline for a volume of that same name a year or so before the start of the project. Reflecting

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the same concern about the increasingly narrow focus of most social movement scholarship that motivated the project, I had in mind a volume in which I would devote chapters to a half dozen or so neglected topics in the study of social movements. But early on in the broader Mellon/Center project, I realized that the collaborative conversation in which we were engaged afforded the perfect vehicle for a much more interesting version of the book I had in mind. Why not collaborate in identifying and giving voice to a set of consequential silences in the study of political contention? That is what we have tried to do. The ground rules for the volume were simple. All core faculty proposed silences, but at least two had to endorse the topic and agree to serve as coauthors for it to make it into the volume.

This does not, of course, mean that these are the only relevant silences in the study of contentious politics. Our own initial list of candidate topics ran to fifteen or so. No doubt there are many more than this. Nor should our thoughts on any of the seven silences be taken as the last word on the topic. In the exploratory spirit of the overall project, we offer these chapters as little more than provisional agenda-setting efforts. By doing so, we hope not only to motivate scholars to think more systematically about these seven topics, but to identify other silences that deserve similar treatment. We will count the volume as successful to the extent that it stimulates a still broader conversation on the dynamics of contentious politics.

Doug McAdam
Menlo Park, CA
September 20, 2000