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Wise Quacks

Charles Tilly¹

In agreement with many other students of social movements and related phenomena, the Goodwin–Jasper critique of political process theorizing about contentious politics rightly calls attention to the incomplete, provisional, and sometimes contradictory state of explanations in the field. However, it wrongly indicates that major analysts are unaware of these difficulties, it adopts a flawed model of explanation, and it proposes remedies that will actually hinder explanation of contentious political processes.

KEY WORDS: social movements; contentious politics; political processes.

Before the late 19th century, all sorts of people had the right to provide health care in the United States. Midwives, pharmacists, herb sellers, wise women, and a colorful variety of physicians dispensed their services to the sick and infirm without benefit or restriction of governmental licensing. Then, in a rush, arrived:

- diffusion of bacteriological medicine and complex diagnostic devices, such as X-rays
- establishment of major American medical schools on science-based European models
- suppression of private apprenticeship as a path to medical practice
- multiplication of hospitals as sites for medical training, practice, research, and health care
- proliferation of hospital-based nursing schools
- strengthening of the American Medical Association (AMA) as a professional pressure group

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- fortification of county medical societies in alliance with the AMA
- establishment of physicians' licensed monopoly over prescription or administration of many drugs and treatments

Those changes intertwined to define eclectic, homeopathic, osteopathic, chiropractic, faith-based, and herbal medicines—which had previously thrived—as forms of quackery deserving suppression or at least aggressive containment. Even wise quacks lost their right to a hearing.

At the same time, state-backed organizational changes in health care subordinated nurses, midwives, pharmacists, and other licensed medical practitioners to the authority of chartered physicians. With governmental assistance and collaboration of other licensed professionals, physicians greatly restricted the operating zones of their fellow health care specialists. Pharmacists lost their previously broad mandate to dispense medicines, advise the suffering, and treat minor ailments or injuries. Midwives almost vanished; they attended roughly half of all American births in 1900, far less than 1% in 1973. Except as modified by increasing capitalization of hospitals and massive movement of graduate nurses from private care to hospital employment, that physician-dominated establishment ruled American health care up to the recent past. However, it only stabilized between 1875 and 1920 after immense sectarian struggles among advocates of different strains in medical thinking.

No one, thank goodness, licenses explanations of political contention. Yet James Jasper and Jeff Goodwin (hereafter Jaswin) write about political process analyses with some of the contempt for rival views that animated late 19th-century medical practitioners. “Tautological, trivial, inadequate, or just plain wrong,” they call existing treatments of political process and opportunity. The tone strikes a practiced ear as odd, because Goodwin and Jasper are well established analysts of political processes, and because—as the paper's abundant quotations from ostensible offenders reveal—their complaints echo dissatisfactions other political process analysts have been voicing for some time.

Who, then, are the vile vine-vending quacks, and what constitutes their quackery? For Jaswin, all purveyors of political process models have committed some degree of fraud by treating prevailing conceptions of political opportunities, mobilizing structures, framing processes, and contention itself as an adequate set of concepts for social movement analyses. To that extent, political process practitioners qualify as quacks. As an aging practitioner of political process analyses who narrowly escapes the Jaswin excommunication and as a frequent collaborator of Doug McAdam and Sidney Tarrow (who bear the brunt of Jaswin fulminations), I fear for my license to practice.

Our good doctors' diagnosis and prescription therefore raise pressing questions:

- How accurate is their critique?
- On what reasoning does it rest?
- How does it explain the malady?
- What remedy does it propose?
- How likely is that remedy to cure the illness?
- What alternatives to their proposed treatment might we try?

My comments address those six questions in order.

HOW ACCURATE IS THE JASWIN CRITIQUE?

Despite heroic recent synthesizing efforts by Mark Lichbach, Sidney Tarrow, and others, analyses of contentious politics remain a zone of intense intellectual contention, right down to disputes over the relevant domain: contention, collective action, social movements, identity formation, or something else? Jaswin pick up and knot together significant strands of the prevailing self-criticism and mutual recrimination among students of contentious politics. They capture, for example, the enduring conflict between views of political opportunities as (1) durable organizational differences among governments and (2) change in organizational environments of particular political actors. They accurately identify the tendency of social movement specialists to concentrate on movements that match their theoretical preconceptions—indeed, on the whole, their political and moral preferences. They rightly complain of the propensity to apply basic explanatory concepts flexibly after the fact, thus reducing or extinguishing those concepts' rigor. They properly identify the search for invariant models of political processes—one size fits all, or at least all members of a category—as a wild goose chase. All these weaknesses of recent work deserve castigation and, especially, correction.

Jaswin also declare that “The bias lurking beneath these problems is that ‘structural’ factors (i.e., factors that are relatively stable over time and outside the control of movement actors) are seen and emphasized more readily than others—and nonstructural factors are often analyzed as though they were structural factors.” This claim is either incorrect, tendentious, or so badly stated as to be misleading. It is incorrect if it means that analysts of contentious politics ignore fluctuations in actors' environments as incitements to collective action and likewise obscure the importance of interactions between actors and their environments, including other actors within those environments. It is tendentious if it means that factors Jaswin happen

to regard as important have not received enough attention in previous work. It is misleading if by nonstructural factors it does not actually mean (as the parenthetical definition implies) fluctuating elements that respond to movement actors' actions but (as later discussions suggest) contenders' cognitive and emotional states. In a spirit of reconciliation, I lean toward the verdict "badly stated."

Jaswin go on to indict analyses of political opportunity structure on dual grounds: (1) different analysts propose contradictory definitions and components of political opportunities, and (2) the same analysts believe that political opportunities supply the necessary and sufficient conditions for social movements. The first indictment is correct, but not very helpful, because it simply reiterates the conventional characterization of social movement theories (and theories of contentious politics as a whole); reviewers and synthesizers usually describe political process thinking as a zone of flux and controversy. The second misrepresents the usual practice of political process analysts, who actually have the habit of intoning not a single slogan but a four-part litany: political opportunities (including, not so incidentally, threats), mobilizing structures, framing processes, and contentious interaction. That the four elements do not yet constitute a compelling causal theory, political process analysts are usually the first to remark. No active participant in the debate claims that political opportunities constitute the necessary and sufficient conditions of contention.

ON WHAT REASONING DOES THE CRITIQUE REST?

Despite an epigraph condemning invariant models of social processes, the paper assumes that general explanations, when they exist at all, take the form of covering laws. Because no covering laws apply to contentious politics, Jaswin reason, analysts can seek only to describe and explain particular instances of contentious politics. Explanation becomes interpretation: empathetic reconstruction of an actor's orientations. Although in recent decades many social scientists have followed the same logical path, the path goes wrong at two different turnings. First, it fails to recognize that an alternative mode of explanation is readily available: the identification of wide-ranging, recurrent causal mechanisms that concatenate into different structures and sequences according to context; most scientific explanation actually invokes such mechanisms instead of invariant laws. Second, such an argument claims implicitly that the deep causes of social processes reside within individuals, in some interplay of emotion and consciousness, in what many psychologists and philosophers call "propositional attitudes." The basic Jaswin critique translates into something like these terms: The struc-

tural bias of political process theorists leads them to ignore or distort the mainsprings of human behavior, which are propositional attitudes. The confusion worsens when Jaswin identify propositional attitudes with culture, thus locating culture in individual minds and bodies rather than in social relations and interaction. Hence, the unjustified charge that McAdam's distinction between political opportunities and people's perceptions of those opportunities commits the fallacy of "misplaced concreteness." If individual awareness is the only or fundamental reality, attribution of existence to other entities does, indeed, misplace concreteness. However, what if it is *not* the only or fundamental reality?

HOW DO JASWIN EXPLAIN THE MALADY?

In truth, they do not try very hard. They blame the "prolific efforts of senior scholars" and the spuriously precise appeal of structural metaphors, but make no effort to analyze the changes through which various political process ideas (once no more than a gleam in the eyes of a few Marxist scholars) came to dominate North American social movement writing. Jaswin leave open two possibilities: (1) that for unavowed (but indubitably nefarious) reasons, the elders deliberately foisted an unsound doctrine on their juniors; or (2) that the elders remain too befuddled or too enchanted with their own meager accomplishments for recognition of their position's evident weaknesses. As one of the elders, I defy Jaswin to document either alternative.

WHAT REMEDY DO JASWIN PROPOSE?

They propose a four-step treatment: (1) Abandon invariant models, (2) beware of conceptual stretching, (3) recognize that cultural and strategic processes define and create the factors usually portrayed as "structural," and (4) do some splitting to balance all the lumping. The first and the fourth, in the Jaswin rendition, amount to the same remedy: particularize, differentiate, forget about generalization. Although the second prescription—beware of conceptual stretching—also becomes identical to the first and fourth when taken to an extreme, short of an absolute version it wisely warns analysts to prefer slim models over fat ones.

As for recognition that cultural and strategic processes define and create the factors usually portrayed as structural, the admonition amounts to advocacy of phenomenological fundamentalism. It asserts that consciousness exists prior to interaction, forms independently of interaction, and to

some degree causes interaction. To those of us who hold to other ontologies, such as relation realism, holism, or even methodological individualism, the remedy entails bitter medicine.

HOW LIKELY IS THAT REMEDY TO CURE THE ILLNESS?

Here we arrive at the deepest ground of disagreement. Phenomenological fundamentalism constitutes a very unlikely source of explanations for social processes, and a very likely source of explanatory tautologies in which people do things because they have propensities to do those things. Any thoroughgoing phenomenologist who wants to explain observed social processes, however, will have to rely much more heavily on cognitive science, neuroscience, linguistics, and/or evolutionary genetics than social movement analysts, including Jaswin, have so far shown any inclination to do. If you analyze mental events, you must create or adopt a theory of mind. Jaswin offer us no program for explanation of phenomenology and its changes.

Let's get this straight. Good conceptualization delimits zones of causal coherence and identifies analogous processes while minimizing fruitless analogies. Good description establishes what is to be explained. Sympathetic reconstruction of actors' situations often (but not always) helps separate superior from inferior explanations. However, the long-run object of the enterprise is explanation, the tracing of connected causes and effects. The Jaswin program does not take us far in that direction.

WHAT ALTERNATIVES TO THE PROPOSED TREATMENT MIGHT WE TRY?

Without replaying all the relational music I have been broadcasting in recent years, let me suggest several tacks that social movement analysts—and students of contentious politics in general—might fruitfully take:

- Define the problem not as the explanation of social movements but as the explanation of contentious politics, including both (1) differences in the operation of contrasting forms of contentious politics within the same regimes, and (2) differences in the operation of contentious politics within contrasting regimes. Social movements, in such a perspective, become just one historically shaped form of collective, mutual claim making.

- Interrogate received categories concerning the phenomenon to be explained, with their implication that each one represents either a causally coherent phenomenon or a well defined location within a coherent causal space; ask whether social movements, rebellions, nationalism, guerrilla, and other conventionally differentiated forms of contention represent coherent units or sites for causal analysis.
- Search not for universal patterns at the level of whole structures or sequences but for (1) analogous causal mechanisms such as coalition formation, cyclical effects on claim making, innovation in repertoires, and representation of identities; and (2) conditions governing the combination and sequencing of those mechanisms.
- Recognize that, at best, such a search will not yield total accounts of complex events, processes, or structures—social movements or otherwise—but reliable, transferable explanations of significant elements within complex events, processes, or structures.
- Integrate the explanation of changing phenomenologies, identities, and collective representations into the analysis of interaction instead of treating it as prior to or separate from contentious interaction.
- On pain of permanent exclusion from the pages of *Sociological Forum*, ban forever the whole class of criticisms that complain, essentially, “You’re underestimating the importance of the variables I find interesting.”

That is the program that Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and I have been pursuing in collaboration for some time.

These days theories of contentious politics remain, as Jaswin say, contested, inconsistent, and poorly integrated. We bedside doctors need all the help we can get, especially when it comes to prescribing effective treatment. In a time of great uncertainty about diagnoses and prescriptions, after all, the quacks may actually turn out to be wise guys.