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Giugni, Marco

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Political Opportunities: From Tilly to Tilly

MARCO GIUGNI
University of Geneva

A few years ago, Goodwin and Jasper (2004) depicted the political process approach to social movements as the dominant paradigm in the study of social movements and contentious politics. The concept of political opportunities lies at the core of this approach. Political opportunities can be defined broadly as “*consistent but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national signals to social or political actors which either encourage or discourage them to use their internal resources to form social movements*” (Tarrow 1996: 54, emphasis in original). More specifically, they refer to those aspects of the political system that affect the possibilities that challenging groups have to mobilize effectively. In this sense, opportunities are “options for collective action, with chances and risks attached to them, which depend on factors outside the mobilizing group” (Koopmans 2004: 65). Four main dimensions of political opportunity have been stressed in the literature (McAdam 1996): (1) the relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system; (2) the stability or instability of that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity; (3) the presence or absence of elite allies; and (4) the state’s capacity and propensity for repression.

Chuck Tilly undoubtedly was the most prominent among those scholars who have made the concept of political opportunities so central to the field during the past thirty to forty years. In this brief essay I would like to discuss the use of this concept in the social movement literature as well as stress Tilly’s fundamental contribution in its origin and conceptualization. After having recalled Tilly’s legacy on this concept, I will deal with the criticisms it has received. Finally, I will mention some recent developments that have tried to avoid some of the pitfalls in the use of this concept.

We can hardly overestimate Tilly’s contribution to the study of social movements and contentious politics. Among his numerous contributions is his impulse for what has become known as the political process approach

(McAdam 1999). In *From Mobilization to Revolution* (1978), he made perhaps the first systematic statement about the role of political opportunities for challengers. To be sure, the idea that the ebb and flows of protest activity depends on changes within the broader political system was not new. Lipsky (1970), for example, stressed it nearly one decade earlier. Nor was the very concept of political opportunity structures unknown to students of social movements. The first to have used it is perhaps Eisinger (1973: 25), who looked at how the degree of institutional access explained variations across American cities in riot behavior. Yet, Tilly has first conceptualized opportunities within a more comprehensive model made of five components: interests, organization, mobilization, collective action, and opportunity. The latter, which “describes the relationship between the population’s interests and the current state of the world around it” (Tilly 1978: 55) refers to the extent to which power, repression (and facilitation), and opportunity (and threat) provide options for collective action.

From this initial conceptualization, the concept and usage of political opportunities have evolved basically in two directions (Gamson and Meyer 1996; McAdam 1996; Tarrow 1996; see Kriesi 2004 and Meyer 2004 for recent reviews). On one hand, especially American scholars have focused on the more volatile aspects of political opportunities, looking at the opening up of “windows of opportunities” that may encourage collective actors to form or join social movements and carry protest activities. Here the focus is on explaining the emergence or development over time of a given movement or movement cycle on the basis of changes in the institutionalized political system or the configuration of power (e.g. McAdam 1999; Tarrow 1989). On the other hand, mostly, but not exclusively, European scholars have looked at the more stable aspects of political opportunities, trying to account for cross-national differences in the forms, levels, and outcomes of social movements and protest activities (e.g. Kitschelt 1986; Kriesi et al. 1995). While the first strand of research has looked at political *opportunities* in a more dynamic fashion, in the second, more static perspective political opportunity *structures* have central stage. Here is probably where the problems for proponents of the political process approach begin.

As it happens to all concepts and approaches that become so dominant within a given field, the concept of political opportunities has made the object of criticisms, which at times have turned into frontal attacks. An often cited example of softer criticism was made by Gamson and Mayer (1996).

They started their assessment quite straightforwardly by stating that

[t]he concept of political opportunity structure is in trouble, in danger of becoming a sponge that soaks up virtually every aspect of the social movement environment – political institutions and culture, crises of various sorts, political alliance and policy shifts (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 275),

then go on by saying that “[t]he essential problem is that everyone who writes about political opportunity structure refers to different variables.” Furthermore, they stress the fact that the concept has served a range of different functions, based on different definitions. Similarly, McAdam (1996: 31) warns us against the risks of conceptual confusion in the use of the concept, stressing that

[i]f we are to avoid the dangers of conceptual confusion, it is critical that we be explicit about *which dependent variable* we are seeking to explain and *which dimensions* of *political opportunity* are germane to that explanation (McAdam 1996: 31, emphasis in original).

The most fundamental criticism to the concept of political opportunities, however, has more recently come from Goodwin and Jasper (2004; see also 1999). These authors argue that political process theory has become hegemonic in the field, to the extent that alternative explanations have found little space in the literature. Their criticism is in particular addressed to the concept of political opportunity structures and the structural bias they find in it. Therefore, they cast serious doubts on the usefulness of this concept to understanding social movements. The following excerpt illustrates well the depth of their criticism: “the political opportunity thesis is not simply tautological, trivial, insufficient, or ambiguous: it is, as an invariant causal hypothesis, just plain wrong” (Goodwin and Jasper 2004: 14).

Such an attack could not remain unchallenged. Indeed, some among the leading political opportunity theorists, including Tilly himself, have been given a chance to respond to the criticism in subsequent chapters of the book (see also the rejoinder by Goodwin and Jasper). Tilly’s answer, in particular, stressed the problems relating to the “phenomenological fundamentalism” he attributes to Goodwin and Jasper’s criticism of political process theory. Instead, he proposed an alternative treatment, which is the one he, together with Doug McAdam and Sid Tarrow, has outlined in *Dynamics of Contention* (2001) as well as, together with Sidney Tarrow, in the more reader friendly *Contentious Politics* (2006), I leave others to

judge whether this is a better remedy to the illness of political opportunity structures.

Perhaps in response to these criticisms, some scholars have recently started to move away from the traditional view of political opportunities. This has been done in different ways. I think four of them deserve special mention: discursive opportunities, specific opportunities, perceived opportunities, and the shift from conditions to mechanisms in the study of social movements and contentious politics.

Discursive Opportunities.—Perhaps one of the first to acknowledge that opportunity has a strong cultural component was Gamson (e.g. Ferree et al. 2002; Gamson and Meyer 1996; see also McAdam 1994). Recent theorizations have stressed that opportunities for mobilization have two sides: an institutional side referring to the access challengers have to the institutionalized political system, the configuration of power, and so forth, and a discursive side relating to the public visibility and resonance as well as the political legitimacy of certain actors, identities, and claims (Koopmans et al. 2005). In other words, what matters is not only the extent to which social movements face an open or closed institutional setting, but also the extent to which their claims and identities relate to prevailing discourses in the public domain.

Specific Opportunities.—In the traditional conceptualization, political opportunity structures are seen as a general setting affecting all movements in a similar fashion and to a similar extent, as if they could be defined irrespective of the characteristics of specific issue fields and collective actors. Some scholars have tried to nuance this bold statement by suggesting that there also are political opportunities which are specific to certain movements or issue fields (Berclaz and Giugni 2005). For example, Koopmans et al. (2005), have proposed that specific opportunities for claim-making in the field of immigration and ethnic relations politics stem from the prevailing conceptions of citizenship and their crystallization in incorporation regimes, while Giugni et al. (2009) suggest to look at institutional approaches to the welfare state to find specific opportunities for collective action in the field of unemployment politics.

Perceived Opportunities.—Another way in which scholars have tried to improve the traditional view of political opportunities consists in acknowledging that opportunities must be perceived in order to be seized (Banaszak 1996; Gamson and Meyer 1996; Kurzman 1996; McAdam et al. 1996). Consequently, we need to acknowledge that opportunities can be there “objectively,” but they can simply be either ignored or not perceived

as such by challengers. As Gamson and Meyer (1996: 283), among others, have pointed out, “[a]n opportunity not recognized is no opportunity at all.”

From Conditions to Mechanisms.—The most radical shift from the traditional view of political opportunities, however, came from Tilly himself and his two co-authors (McAdam et al. 2001). These authors have proposed an alternative approach to what they called the “classic social movement agenda for explaining contentious politics.” Specifically, they suggested to move away from the search for the conditions that favor of prevent challengers to mobilize and focus instead on the processes and mechanisms underlying their mobilization. Specifically, they suggest distinguishing between cognitive, relational, and environmental mechanisms.

I think that all four developments represent positive developments in this research tradition. At the same time, one should not forget that political opportunities are only one aspect among others affecting social movements and that they do not single-handedly bring about protest activities. In spite of criticisms going in this direction (Goodwin and Jasper 2004), however, this was in fact never the point of political opportunity theorists or, more generally, political process analysts. As Tilly (2004: 34) himself made it clear, “[n]o active participant in the debate claims that political opportunities constitute the necessary and sufficient conditions of contention”.

The concept of political opportunities has made the fortunes and sometimes the misfortunes of the study of social movements and contentious politics in the past three to four decades. On one hand, it allowed analysts to reject the idea that collective action is a phenomenon *sui generis* detached from what goes on in the realm of institutional politics. Tilly’s contribution is crucial in this respect. On the other hand, the concept and especially its widespread usage to explain a range of political phenomena, including social movements, have been subject to various criticisms. The recent developments outlined above help us avoiding some of the pitfalls critics have stressed. Again, Tilly’s work is fundamental here, not only with regard to the shift from conditions to mechanisms, but also for the other directions. I think that all of them were present in Tilly’s original formulation, but that they have tended to be neglected by scholars in the field in subsequent works. That recent scholarship is trying to unearth them can only underscore once more his fundamental contribution to the study of social movements and contentious politics.

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Contact: marco.giugni@unige.ch (Marco Giugni).