

# POWER

## A CRITICAL READER

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# THE STRUCTURING OF PROTEST

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Common sense and historical experience combine to suggest a simple but compelling view of the roots of power in any society. Crudely but clearly stated, those who control the means of physical coercion, and those who control the means of producing wealth, have power over those who do not. This much is true whether the means of coercion consists in the primitive force of a warrior caste or the technological force of a modern army. And it is true whether the control of production consists in control by priests of the mysteries of the calendar on which agriculture depends, or control by financiers of the large-scale capital on which industrial production depends. Since coercive force can be used to gain control of the means of producing wealth, and since control of wealth can be used to gain coercive force, these two sources of power tend over time to be drawn together within one ruling class.

Common sense and historical experience also combine to suggest that these sources of power are protected and enlarged by the use of that power not only to control the actions of men and women, but also to control their beliefs. What some call superstructure, and what others call culture, includes an elaborate system of beliefs and ritual behaviors which defines for people what is right and what is wrong and why; what is possible and what is impossible; and the behavioral imperatives that follow from these beliefs. Because this superstructure of beliefs and rituals is evolved in the context of unequal power, it is inevitable that beliefs and rituals reinforce inequality, by rendering the powerful divine and the challengers evil. Thus the class struggles that might otherwise be inevitable in sharply unequal societies ordinarily do not seem either possible or right from the perspective of those who live within the structure of belief and ritual fashioned by those societies. People whose only possible recourse in struggle is to defy the beliefs and rituals laid down by their rulers ordinarily do not.

The emergence of a protest movement entails a transformation both of consciousness and of behavior. The change in consciousness has at least three distinct aspects. First, "the system"—or those aspects of the system that people experience and perceive—loses legitimacy. Large numbers of men and women who ordinarily accept the authority of their rulers and legitimacy of institutional arrangements come to believe in some measure that these rulers and these arrangements are unjust and wrong. Second, people who are ordinarily fatalistic, who believe that existing arrangements are inevitable, begin to assert "rights" that imply demands for change. Third, there is a new sense of efficacy; people who ordinarily consider themselves helpless come to believe that they have some capacity to alter their lot.

The change in behavior is equally striking, and usually more easily recognized, at least when it takes the form of mass strikes or marches or riots. Such behavior seems to us to involve two distinguishing elements. First, masses of people become defiant; they violate the traditions and laws to which they ordinarily acquiesce, and they flaunt the authorities to whom they ordinarily defer. And second, their defiance is acted out collectively, as members of a group, and not as isolated individuals. Strikes and riots are clearly forms of collective action, but even some forms of defiance which appear to be individual acts, such as crime or school truancy or incendiarism, while more ambiguous, may have a collective dimension, for those who engage in these acts may consider themselves to be part of a larger movement. Such apparently atomized acts of defiance can be considered movement events when those involved perceive themselves to be acting as members of a group, and when they share a common set of protest beliefs.

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### Institutional Limits on the Incidence of Mass Insurgency

Aristotle believed that the chief cause of internal warfare was inequality, that the lesser rebel in order to be equal. But human experience has proved him wrong, most of the time. Sharp inequality has been constant, but rebellion infrequent. Aristotle underestimated the controlling force of the social structure on political life. However hard their lot may be, people usually remain acquiescent, conforming to the accustomed patterns of daily life in their community, and believing those patterns to be both inevitable and just. Men and women till the fields each day, or stoke the furnaces, or tend the looms, obeying the rules and rhythms of earning a livelihood; they mate and bear children hopefully, and mutely watch them die; they abide by the laws of church and community and defer to their rulers, striving to earn a little grace and esteem. In other words most of the time people conform to the institutional arrangements which enmesh them, which regulate the rewards and penalties of daily life, and which appear to be the only possible reality.

Those for whom the rewards are most meager, who are the most oppressed by inequality, are also acquiescent. Sometimes they are the most acquiescent, for they have little defense against the penalties that can be imposed for defiance. Moreover, at most times and in most places, and especially in the United States, the poor are led to believe that their destitution is deserved, and that the riches and power that others command are also deserved. In more traditional societies sharp inequalities are thought to be divinely ordained, or to be a part of the natural order of things. In more modern societies, such as the United States, riches and power are ascribed to personal qualities of industry or talent; it follows that those who have little or nothing have only what they deserve. . . .

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Ordinarily, in short, the lower classes accept their lot, and that acceptance can be taken for granted; it need not be bargained for by their

rulers. This capacity of the institutions of a society to enforce political docility is the most obvious way in which protest is socially structured, in the sense that it is structurally precluded most of the time.

Sometimes, however, the poor do become defiant. They challenge traditional authorities, and the rules laid down by those authorities. They demand redress for their grievances. American history is punctuated by such events, from the first uprisings by freeholders, tenants, and slaves in colonial America, to the postrevolutionary debtor rebellions, through the periodic eruptions of strikes and riots by industrial workers, to the ghetto riots of the twentieth century. In each instance, masses of the poor were somehow able, if only briefly, to overcome the shame bred by a culture which blames them for their plight; somehow they were able to break the bonds of conformity enforced by work, by family, by community, by every strand of institutional life; somehow they were able to overcome the fears induced by police, by militia, by company guards.

When protest does arise, when masses of those who are ordinarily docile become defiant, a major transformation has occurred. . . . [T]he emergence of popular uprisings reflects profound changes in the larger society. . . . [O]nly under exceptional conditions will the lower classes become defiant—and thus, in our terms, *only under exceptional conditions are the lower classes afforded the socially determined opportunity to press for their own interests.*

. . . This argues that it not only requires a major social dislocation before protest can emerge, but that a sequence or combination of dislocations probably must occur before the anger that underlies protest builds to a high pitch, and before that anger can find expression in collective defiance.

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And with that said, the implication for an understanding of the potential for political influence among the poor becomes virtually self-evident: *since periods of profound social dislocations are infrequent, so too are opportunities for protest among the lower classes.*

## The Patterning of Insurgency

Just as quiescence is enforced by institutional life, and just as the eruption of discontent is determined by changes in institutional life, the forms of political protest are also determined by the institutional context in which people live and work. . . .

### The Electoral System as a Structuring Institution

In the United States the principal structuring institution, at least in the early phases of protest, is the electoral-representative system. The significance of this assertion is not that the electoral system provides an avenue of influence under normal circumstances. To the contrary, . . . it is usually when unrest among the lower classes breaks out of the confines of electoral procedures that the poor may have some influence, for the instability and polarization they then threaten to create by their actions in the factories or in the streets may force some response from electoral leaders. But whether action emerges in the factories or the streets may depend on the course of the early phase of protest at the polls.

Ordinarily defiance is first expressed in the voting booth simply because, whether defiant or not, people have been socialized within a political culture that defines voting as the mechanism through which political change can and should properly occur. The vitality of this political culture, the controlling force of the norms that guide political discontent into electoral channels, is not understood merely by asserting the pervasiveness of liberal political ideology in the United States and the absence of competing ideologies, for that is precisely what has to be explained. Some illumination is provided by certain features of the electoral system itself, by its rituals and celebrations and rewards, for these practices help to ensure the persistence of confidence in electoral procedures. Thus it is significant that the franchise was extended to white working-class men at a very early period in the history of the United States, and that a vigorous system of local government developed. Through these mechanisms, large proportions of the population were embraced by the rituals of electoral campaigns, and shared in the symbolic rewards of the electoral system, while some also shared in

the tangible rewards of a relatively freely dispensed government patronage. Beliefs thus nurtured do not erode readily.

Accordingly, one of the first signs of popular discontent in the contemporary United States is usually a sharp shift in traditional voting patterns. In a sense, the electoral system serves to measure and register the extent of the emerging disaffection. Thus, the urban working class reacted to economic catastrophe in the landslide election of 1932 by turning against the Republican Party to which it had given its allegiance more or less since 1896. Similarly, the political impact of the forces of modernization and migration was first evident in the crucial presidential elections of 1956 and 1960. Urban blacks, who had voted Democratic in successively larger proportions since the election of 1936, began to defect to Republican columns or to stay away from the polls.

These early signs of political instability ordinarily prompt efforts by contending political leaders to placate the defecting groups, usually at this stage with conciliatory pronouncements. The more serious the electoral defections, or the keener the competition among political elites, the more likely that such symbolic appeasements will be offered. But if the sources of disturbance and anger are severe—and only if they are severe and persistent—conciliations are likely merely to fuel mass arousal, for in effect they imply that some of the highest leaders of the land identify with the indignation of the lowly masses.

Moreover, just as political leaders play an influential role in stimulating mass arousal, so do they play an important role in shaping the demands of the aroused.<sup>1</sup> What are intended to serve as merely symbolic appeasements may instead provide a focus for the still inchoate anxieties and diffuse anger that drive the masses. Thus early rhetorical pronouncements by liberal political leaders, including presidents of the United States, about the “rights” of workers and the “rights” of blacks not only helped to fuel the discontents of workers and blacks, but helped to concentrate those discontents on demands articulated by leading officials of the nation.

But when people are thus encouraged in spirit without being appeased in fact, their defiance may escape the boundaries of electoral rituals, and escape the boundaries established by the

political norms of the electoral-representative system in general. They may indeed become rebellious, but while their rebellion often appears chaotic from the perspective of conventional American politics, or from the perspective of some organizers, it is not chaotic at all; it is structured political behavior. When people riot in the streets, their behavior is socially patterned, and within those patterns, their actions are to some extent deliberate and purposeful.

### Social Location and Forms of Defiance



Just as electoral political institutions channel protest into voter activity in the United States, and may even confine it within these spheres if the disturbance is not severe and the electoral system appears responsive, so do other features of institutional life determine the forms that protest takes when it breaks out of the boundaries of electoral politics. Thus, it is no accident that some people strike, others riot, or loot the granaries, or burn the machines, for just as the patterns of daily life ordinarily assure mass quiescence, so do these same patterns influence the form defiance will take when it erupts.

First, people experience deprivation and oppression within a concrete setting, not as the end product of large and abstract processes, and it is the concrete experience that molds their discontent into specific grievances against specific targets. Workers experience the factory, the speeding rhythm of the assembly line, the foreman, the spies and the guards, the owner and the paycheck. They do not experience monopoly capitalism. People on relief experience the shabby waiting rooms, the overseer or the case-worker, and the dole. They do not experience American social welfare policy. Tenants experience the leaking ceilings and cold radiators, and they recognize the landlord. They do not recognize the banking, real estate, and construction systems. No small wonder, therefore, that when the poor rebel they so often rebel against the overseer of the poor, or the slumlord, or the middling merchant, and not against the banks or the governing elites to whom the overseer, the slumlord, and the merchant also defer. In other words, it is the daily experience of people that

shapes their grievances, establishes the measure of their demands, and points out the targets of their anger.

Second, institutional patterns shape mass movements by shaping the collectivity out of which protest can arise. Institutional life aggregates people or disperses them, molds group identities, and draws people into the settings within which collective action can erupt. Thus factory work gathers men and women together, educates them in a common experience, and educates them to the possibilities of cooperation and collective action. Casual laborers or petty entrepreneurs, by contrast, are dispersed by their occupations, and are therefore less likely to perceive their commonalities of position, and less likely to join together in collective action.

Third, and most important, institutional roles determine the strategic opportunities for defiance, for it is typically by rebelling against the rules and authorities associated with their everyday activities that people protest. Thus workers protest by striking. They are able to do so because they are drawn together in the factory setting, and their protests consist mainly in defying the rules and authorities associated with the workplace. The unemployed do not and cannot strike, even when they perceive that those who own the factories and businesses are to blame for their troubles. Instead, they riot in the streets where they are forced to linger, or storm the relief centers, and it is difficult to imagine them doing otherwise.

That they should do otherwise, however, is constantly asserted, and it is in such statements that the influence (as well as the absurdity) of the pluralist view becomes so evident. By denying the constraints which are imposed by institutional location, protest is readily discredited, as when insurgents are denounced for having ignored the true centers of power by attacking the wrong target by the wrong means. Thus welfare administrators admonish recipients for disrupting relief offices and propose instead that they learn how to lobby in the state legislature or Congress. But welfare clients cannot easily go to the state or national capital, and when a few do, they are of course ignored. Sometimes, however, they can disrupt relief offices, and that is harder to ignore.

In the same vein, a favorite criticism of the student peace movement, often made by erstwhile sympathizers, was that it was foolish of the

students to protest the Vietnam War by demonstrating at the universities and attacking blameless administrators and faculties. It was obviously not the universities that were waging the war, critics argued, but the military-industrial complex. The students were not so foolish, however. The exigencies of mass action are such that they were constrained to act out their defiance within the universities where they were physically located and could thus act collectively, and where they played a role on which an institution depended, so that their defiance mattered.

Since our examples might suggest otherwise, we should note at this juncture that the tendency to impute freedom of choice in the evolution of political strategies is not peculiar to those who have large stakes in the preservation of some institution, whether welfare administrators or university professors. Nor is the tendency peculiar to those of more conservative political persuasion. Radical organizers make precisely the same assumption when they call upon the working class to organize in one way or another and to pursue one political strategy or another, even in the face of overwhelming evidence that social conditions preclude the exercise of such options. Opportunities for defiance are not created by analyses of power structures. If there is a genius in organizing, it is the capacity to sense what it is possible for people to do under given conditions, and to then help them do it. In point of fact, however, most organizing ventures ask that people do what they cannot do, and the result is failure.

*It is our second general point, then, that the opportunities for defiance are structured by features of institutional life.<sup>2</sup> Simply put, people cannot defy institutions to which they have no access, and to which they make no contribution.*

### **The Limited Impact of Mass Defiance**

If mass defiance is neither freely available nor the forms it takes freely determined, it must also be said that it is generally of limited political impact. Still, some forms of protest appear to have more impact than others, thus posing an analytical question of considerable importance.

It is our judgment that *the most useful way to think about the effectiveness of protest is to examine the*

*disruptive effects on institutions of different forms of mass defiance, and then to examine the political reverberations of those disruptions.* The impact of mass defiance is, in other words, not so much directly as indirectly felt. Protest is more likely to have a seriously disruptive impact when the protestors play a central role in an institution, and it is more likely to evoke wider political reverberations when powerful groups have large stakes in the disrupted institution. . . .

### **The Limits of Institutional Disruption**

To refer to an institutional disruption is simply to note the obvious fact that institutional life depends upon conformity with established roles and compliance with established rules. Defiance may thus obstruct the normal operations of institutions. Factories are shut down when workers walk out or sit down; welfare bureaucracies are thrown into chaos when crowds demand relief; landlords may be bankrupted when tenants refuse to pay rent. In each of these cases, *people cease to conform to accustomed institutional roles; they withhold their accustomed cooperation, and by doing so, cause institutional disruptions.*

By our definition, disruption is simply the application of a negative sanction, the withdrawal of a crucial contribution on which others depend, and it is therefore a natural resource for exerting power over others. This form of power is, in fact, regularly employed by individuals and groups linked together in many kinds of cooperative interaction, and particularly by producer groups. Farmers, for example, keep their products off the market in order to force up the price offered by buyers; doctors refuse to provide treatment unless their price is met; oil companies withhold supplies until price concessions are made.

But the amount of leverage that a group gains by applying such negative sanctions is widely variable. Influence depends, first of all, on whether or not the contribution withheld is crucial to others; second, on whether or not those who have been affected by the disruption have resources to be conceded; and third, on whether the obstructionist group can protect itself adequately from reprisals. Once these criteria are stated, it becomes evident that the poor are usually in the least strategic position to benefit from defiance.

Thus, in comparison with most producer groups, the lower classes are often in weak institutional locations to use disruption as a tactic for influence. Many among the lower class are in locations that make their cooperation less than crucial to the operation of major institutions. Those who work in economically marginal enterprises, or who perform marginally necessary functions in major enterprises, or those who are unemployed, do not perform roles on which major institutions depend. Indeed, some of the poor are sometimes so isolated from significant institutional participation that the only "contribution" they can withhold is that of quiescence in civil life: they can riot.

Moreover, those who manage the institutions in which many of the lower classes find themselves often have little to concede to disruptors. When lower-class groups do play an important role in an institution, as they do in sweatshops or in slum tenements, these institutions—operated as they often are by marginal entrepreneurs—may be incapable of yielding very much in response to disruptive pressure.

Finally, lower-class groups have little ability to protect themselves against reprisals that can be employed by institutional managers. The poor do not have to be historians of the occasions when protestors have been jailed or shot down to understand this point. The lesson of their vulnerability is engraved in everyday life; it is evident in every police beating, in every eviction, in every lost job, in every relief termination. The very labels used to describe defiance by the lower classes—the pejorative labels of illegality and violence—testify to this vulnerability and serve to justify severe reprisals when they are imposed. By taking such labels for granted, we fail to recognize what these events really represent: a structure of political coercion inherent in the everyday life of the lower classes.

We can now comment on the association of disruption with spontaneity, perhaps another relic of traditional ways of thinking about lower-class uprisings, although here the issue is a little more complicated. Disruption itself is not necessarily spontaneous, but lower-class disruptions often are, in the sense that they are not planned and executed by formal organizations. In part, this testifies to the paucity of stable organizational resources among the poor, as well as to the cautious and

moderate character of such organizations as are able to survive. But even if formal organizations existed, and even if they were not committed by the exigencies of their own survival to more cautious tactics, the circumstance that lead to mass defiance by the lower class are extremely difficult to predict; and once defiance erupts, its direction is difficult for leaders to control. . . .

Still, if the lower classes do not ordinarily have great disruptive power, and if the use of even that kind of power is not planned, it is the only power they do have. Their use of that power, the weighing of gains and risks, is not calculated in board rooms; it wells up out of the terrible travails that people experience at times of rupture and stress. And at such times, disruptions by the poor may have reverberations that go beyond the institutions in which the disruption is acted out.

### The Limits of Political Disruption

It is not the impact of disruptions on particular institutions that finally tests the power of the poor; it is the political impact of these disruptions. At this level, however, a new set of structuring mechanisms intervenes, for the political impact of institutional disruptions is mediated by the electoral-representative system.

Responses to disruption vary depending on electoral conditions. Ordinarily, during periods of stability, governmental leaders have three rather obvious options when an institutional disruption occurs. They may ignore it; they may employ punitive measures against the disruptors; or they may attempt to conciliate them. If the disruptive group has little political leverage in its own right, as is true of lower-class groups, it will either be ignored or repressed. It is more likely to be ignored when the disrupted institution is not central to the society as a whole, or to other more important groups. Thus if men and women run amok, disrupting the fabric of their own communities, as in the immigrant slums of the nineteenth century, the spectacle may be frightening, but it can be contained within the slums; it will not necessarily have much impact on the society as a whole, or on the well-being of other important groups. Similarly, when impoverished mobs demand relief, they may cause havoc in the relief offices, but chaotic relief offices are not a large problem for the society as a whole, or for important groups. Repression is

more likely to be employed when central institutions are affected, as when railroad workers struck and rioted in the late nineteenth century, or when the police struck in Boston after the First World War. Either way, to be ignored or punished is what the poor ordinarily expect from government, because these are the responses they ordinarily evoke.

But protest movements do not arise during ordinary periods; they arise when large-scale changes undermine political stability. It is this context, as we said earlier, that gives the poor hope and makes insurgency possible in the first place. It is this context that also makes political leaders somewhat vulnerable to protests by the poor.

At times of rapid economic and social change, political leaders are far less free either to ignore disturbances or to employ punitive measures. At such times, the relationship of political leaders to their constituents is likely to become uncertain. This unsettled state of political affairs makes the regime far more sensitive to disturbances, for it is not only more likely that previously uninvolved groups will be activated—the scope of conflict will be widened—but that the scope of conflict will be widened at a time when political alignments have already become unpredictable.

When a political leadership becomes unsure of its support, even disturbances that are isolated within peripheral institutions cannot be so safely ignored, for the mere appearance of trouble and disorder is more threatening when political alignments are unstable. And when the disrupted institutions are central to economic production or to the stability of social life, it becomes imperative that normal operations be restored if the regime is to maintain support among its constituents. Thus when industrial workers joined in massive strikes during the 1930s, they threatened the entire economy of the nation and, given the electoral instability of the times, threatened the future of the nation's political leadership. Under these circumstances, government could hardly ignore the disturbances.

Yet neither could government run the risks entailed by using massive force to subdue the strikers in the 1930s. It could not, in other words, simply avail itself of the option of repression. For one thing the striking workers, like the civil rights demonstrators in the 1960s, had aroused strong sympathy among groups that were crucial

supporters of the regime. For another, unless insurgent groups are virtually of outcast status, permitting leaders of the regime to mobilize popular hatred against them, politically unstable conditions make the use of force risky, since the reactions of other aroused groups cannot be safely predicted. When government is unable to ignore the insurgents, and is unwilling to risk the uncertain repercussions of the use of force, it will make efforts to conciliate and disarm the protestors.

These placating efforts will usually take several forms. First and most obviously, political leaders will offer concessions, or press elites in the private sector to offer concessions, to remedy some of the immediate grievances, both symbolic and tangible, of the disruptive group. Thus mobs of unemployed workers were granted relief in the 1930s; striking industrial workers won higher pay and shorter hours; and angry civil rights demonstrators were granted the right to desegregated public accommodations in the 1960s.

Whether one takes such measures as evidence of the capacity of American political institutions for reform, or brushes them aside as mere tokenism, such concessions were not offered readily by government leaders. In each case, and in some cases more than in others, reform required a break with an established pattern of government accommodation to private elites. Thus the New Deal's liberal relief policy was maintained despite widespread opposition from the business community. Striking workers in the mid-1930s succeeded in obtaining wage concessions from private industry only because state and national political leaders abandoned the age-old policy of using the coercive power of the state to curb strikes. The granting of desegregated public accommodations required that national Democratic leaders turn against their traditional allies among southern plantation elites. In such instances concessions were won by the protestors only when political leaders were finally forced, out of a concern for their own survival, to act in ways which aroused the fierce opposition of economic elites. In short, under conditions of severe electoral instability, the alliance of public and private power is sometimes weakened, if only briefly, and at these moments a defiant poor may make gains.

Second, political leaders, or elites allied with them, will try to quiet disturbances not only by dealing with immediate grievances, but by making



efforts to channel the energies and angers of the protestors into more legitimate and less disruptive forms of political behavior, in part by offering incentives to movement leaders or, in other words, by coopting them. Thus relief demonstrators in both the 1930s and the 1960s were encouraged to learn to use administrative grievance procedures as an alternative to "merely" disrupting relief offices, while their leaders were offered positions as advisors to relief administrators. In the 1960s civil rights organizers left the streets to take jobs in the Great Society programs; and as rioting spread in the northern cities, street leaders in the ghettos were encouraged to join in "dialogues" with municipal officials, and some were offered positions in municipal agencies.

Third, the measures promulgated by government at times of disturbance may be designed not to conciliate the protestors, but to undermine whatever sympathy the protesting group has been able to command from a wider public. Usually this is achieved through new programs that appear to meet the moral demands of the movement, and thus rob it of support without actually yielding much by way of tangible gains. A striking example was the passage of the pension provisions of the Social Security Act. The organized aged in the Townsend Movement were demanding pensions of \$200 a month, with no strings attached, and they had managed to induce some 25 million people to sign supporting petitions. As it turned out, the Social Security Act, while it provided a measure of security for many of the future aged, did nothing for the members of the Townsend Movement, none of whom would be covered by a work-related insurance scheme since they were no longer working, and most of whom would in any case be dead when the payments were to begin some seven years later. But the pension provisions of the Social Security Act answered the *moral* claims of the movement. In principle, government had acted to protect America's aged, thus severing any identification between those who would be old in the future and those who were already old. The Social Security Act effectively dampened public support for the Townsend Plan while yielding the old people nothing. Other examples of responses which undermine public support abound. The widely heralded federal programs for the ghettos in the 1960s were neither

designed nor funded in a way that made it possible for them to have substantial impact on poverty or on the traumas of ghetto life. But the publicity attached to the programs—the din and blare about a "war on poverty" and the development of "model cities"—did much to appease the liberal sympathizers with urban blacks.

Finally, these apparently conciliatory measures make it possible for government to safely employ repressive measures as well. Typically, leaders and groups who are more disruptive, or who spurn the concessions offered, are singled out for arbitrary police action or for more formal legal harassment through congressional investigations or through the courts. In the context of much-publicized efforts by government to ease the grievances of disaffected groups, coercive measures of this kind are not likely to arouse indignation among sympathetic publics. Indeed, this dual strategy is useful in another way, for it serves to cast an aura of balance and judiciousness over government action.

The main point, however, is simply that *the political impact of institutional disruptions depends upon electoral conditions*. Even serious disruptions, such as industrial strikes, will force concessions only when the calculus of electoral instability favors the protestors. And even then, when the protestors succeed in forcing government to respond, they do not dictate the content of those responses. As to the variety of specific circumstances which determine how much the protestors will gain and how much they will lose, we still have a great deal to learn.

### The Demise of Protest

It is not surprising that, taken together, these efforts to conciliate and disarm usually lead to the demise of the protest movement, partly by transforming the movement itself, and partly by transforming the political climate which nourishes protest. With these changes, the array of institutional controls which ordinarily restrain protest is restored, and political influence is once more denied to the lower class.

We said that one form of government response was to make concessions to the protestors, yielding them something of what they demanded, either symbolic or material. But the mere granting of such concessions is probably

not very important in accounting for the demise of a movement. For one thing, whatever is yielded is usually modest if not meager; for another, even modest concessions demonstrate that protest "works," a circumstance that might as easily be expected to fuel a movement as to pacify it.

But concessions are rarely unencumbered. If they are given at all, they are usually part and parcel of measures to reintegrate the movement into normal political channels and to absorb its leaders into stable institutional roles. Thus the right of industrial workers to unionize, won in response to massive and disruptive strikes in the 1930s, meant that workers were encouraged to use newly established grievance procedures in place of the sit-down or the wildcat strike; and the new union leaders, now absorbed in relations with factory management and in the councils of the Democratic Party, become the ideological proponents and organizational leaders of this strategy of normalcy and moderation. Similarly, when blacks won the vote in the South and a share of patronage in the municipalities of the North in response to the disturbances of the 1960s, black leaders were absorbed into electoral and bureaucratic politics and became the ideological proponents of the shift "from protest to politics" (Rustin).

This feature of government action deserves some explanation because the main reintegrative measures—the right to organize, the right to vote, black representation in city government—were also responses to specific demands made by the protestors themselves. To all appearances, government simply acted to redress felt grievances. But the process was by no means as straightforward as that. As we suggested earlier, the movements had arisen through interaction with elites, and had been led to make the demands they made in response to early encouragement by political leaders. Nor was it fortuitous that political leaders came to proclaim as just such causes as the right to organize or the right to vote or the right to "citizen participation." In each case, elites responded to discontent by proposing reforms with which they had experience, and which consisted mainly of extending established procedures to new groups or to new institutional arenas. Collective bargaining was not invented in the 1930s, nor the franchise in the 1960s. Driven by turmoil, political leaders proposed reforms that were in a sense

prefigured by institutional arrangements that already existed, that were drawn from a repertoire provided by existing traditions. And an aroused people responded by demanding simply what political leaders had said they should have. If through some accident of history they had done otherwise, if industrial workers had demanded public ownership of factories, they would probably have still gotten unionism, if they got anything at all; and if impoverished southern blacks had demanded land reform, they would probably have still gotten the vote.

At the same time that government makes efforts to reintegrate disaffected groups, and to guide them into less politically disturbing forms of behavior, it also moves to isolate them from potential supporters and, by doing so, diminishes the morale of the movement. Finally, while the movement is eroding under these influences, its leaders attracted by new opportunities, its followers conciliated, confused, or discouraged, the show of repressive force against recalcitrant elements demolishes the few who are left.

However, the more far-reaching changes do not occur within the movement, but in the political context which nourished the movement in the first place. The agitated and defiant people who compose the movement are but a small proportion of the discontented population on which it draws. Presumably if some leaders were coopted, new leaders would arise; if some participants were appeased or discouraged, others would take their place. But this does not happen, because government's responses not only destroy the movement, they also transform the political climate which makes protest possible. The concessions to the protestors, the efforts to "bring them into the system," and in particular the measures aimed at potential supporters, all work to create a powerful image of a benevolent and responsive government that answers grievances and solves problems. As a result, whatever support might have existed among the larger population dwindles. Moreover, the display of government benevolence stimulates antagonist groups, and triggers the antagonistic sentiments of more neutral sectors. The "tide of public opinion" begins to turn—against labor in the late 1930s, against blacks in the late 1960s. And as it does, the definitions put forward by political leaders also change, particularly when prodded by

contenders for political office who sense the shift in popular mood, and the weaknesses it reveals in an incumbent's support. Thus in the late 1960s, Republican leaders took advantage of white resentment against blacks to attract Democratic voters, raising cries of "law and order" and "workfare not welfare"—the code words for racial antagonism. Such a change is ominous. Where once the powerful voices of the land enunciated a rhetoric that gave courage to the poor, now they enunciate a rhetoric that erases hope, and implants fear. The point should be evident that as these various circumstances combine defiance is no longer possible.

### The Residue of Reform

When protest subsides, concessions may be withdrawn. Thus when the unemployed become docile, the relief rolls are cut even though many are still unemployed; when the ghetto becomes quiescent, evictions are resumed. The reason is simple enough. Since the poor no longer pose the threat of disruption, they no longer exert leverage on political leaders; there is no need for conciliation. This is particularly the case in a climate of growing political hostility, for the concessions granted are likely to become the focus of resentment by other groups.

But some concessions are not withdrawn. As the tide of turbulence recedes, major institutional changes sometimes remain. Thus the right of workers to join unions was not rescinded when turmoil subsided (although some of the rights ceded to unions were withdrawn). And it is not likely that the franchise granted to blacks in the South will be taken back (although just that happened in the post-Reconstruction period). Why, then, are some concessions withdrawn while others become permanent institutional reforms?

The answer, perhaps, is that while some of the reforms granted during periods of turmoil are costly or repugnant to various groups in the society, and are therefore suffered only under duress, other innovations turn out to be compatible (or at least not incompatible) with the interests of more powerful groups, most importantly with the interests of dominant economic groups. Such an assertion has the aura of a conspiracy theory, but in fact the process is not conspiratorial at all. Major industrialists had resisted unionization, but once

forced to concede it as the price of industrial peace, they gradually discovered that labor unions constituted a useful mechanism to regulate the labor force. The problem of disciplining industrial labor had been developing over the course of a century. The depression produced the political turmoil through which a solution was forged. Nor was the solution simply snatched from the air. As noted earlier, collective bargaining was a tried and tested method of dealing with labor disturbances. The tumult of the 1930s made the use of this method imperative; once implemented, the reforms were institutionalized because they continued to prove useful.

Similarly, southern economic elites had no interest in ceding southern blacks the franchise. But their stakes in disfranchising blacks had diminished. The old plantation economy was losing ground to new industrial enterprises; plantation-based elites were losing ground to economic dominants based in industry. The feudal political arrangements on which a plantation economy had relied were no longer of central importance, and certainly they were not of central importance to the new economic elites. Black uprisings, by forcing the extension of the franchise and the modernization of southern politics, thus helped seal a fissure in the institutional fabric of American society, a fissure resulting from the growing inconsistency between the economic and political institutions of the South.

What these examples suggest is that *protesters win, if they win at all, what historical circumstances have already made ready to be conceded*. Still, as Alan Wolfe has said, governments do not change magically through some "historical radical transformation," but only through the actual struggles of the time (154). When people are finally roused to protest against great odds, they take the only options available to them within the limits imposed by their social circumstances. . . .

### A Note on the Role of Protest Leadership

The main point of this chapter is that both the limitations and opportunities for mass protest are shaped by social conditions. The implications for the role of leadership in protest movements can be briefly summarized.

Protest wells up in response to momentous changes in the institutional order. It is not created by organizers and leaders.

Once protest erupts, the specific forms it takes are largely determined by features of social structure. Organizers and leaders who contrive strategies that ignore the social location of the people they seek to mobilize can only fail.

Elites respond to the institutional disruptions that protest causes, as well as to other powerful institutional imperatives. Elite responses are not significantly shaped by the demands of leaders and organizers. Nor are elite responses significantly shaped by formally structured organizations of the poor. Whatever influence lower-class groups occasionally exert in American politics does not result from organization, but from mass protest and the disruptive consequences of protest.

Finally, protest in the United States has been episodic and transient, for as it gains momentum, so too do various forms of institutional accommodation and coercion that have the effect of restoring quiescence. Organizers and leaders cannot prevent the ebbing of protest, nor the erosion of whatever influence protest yielded the lower class. They can only try to win whatever can be won while it can be won.

In these major ways protest movements are shaped by institutional conditions, and not by the purposive efforts of leaders and organizers. The limitations are large and unyielding. Yet within the boundaries created by these limitations, some latitude for purposive effort remains. Organizers and leaders choose to do one thing, or they choose to do another, and what they choose to do affects to some degree the course of the protest movement. If the area of latitude is

less than leaders and organizers would prefer, it is also not enlarged when they proceed as if institutional limitations did not in fact exist by undertaking strategies which fly in the face of these constraints. The wiser course is to understand these limitations, and to exploit whatever latitude remains to enlarge the potential influence of the lower class. And if our conclusions are correct, what this means is that strategies must be pursued that escalate the momentum and impact of disruptive protest at each stage in its emergence and evolution.

#### Notes

1. Edelman ascribes the influence of public officials as "powerful shapers of perceptions" to their virtual monopoly on certain kinds of information, to the legitimacy of the regime with which they are identified, and to the intense identification of people with the state (101-102).
2. This is perhaps what C. L. R. James means when he writes: "Workers are at their very best in collective action in the circumstances of their daily activity or crises arising from it" (95). Richard Flacks has also made a related argument regarding the importance of what he calls "everyday life" in shaping popular movements.

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