Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics

Ronald R. Aminzade
Jack A. Goldstone
Doug McAdam
Elizabeth J. Perry
William H. Sewell, Jr.
Sidney Tarrow
Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics, Ronald Aminzade, Cambridge University Press, 2001, 0521001552, 9780521001557, 280 pages. The aim of the 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. The coauthors hope to redress the present topical imbalance in the field. In particular, the authors take up seven specific topics in the volume: the relationship between emotions and contention; temporality in the study of contention; the spatial dimensions of contention; leadership in contention; the role of threat in contention; religion and contention; and contention in the context of demographic and life-course processes..

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The aim of the 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. The coauthors hope to redress the present topical imbalance in the field. In particular, the authors take up seven specific topics in the volume: the relationship between emotions and contention; temporality in the study of contention; the spatial dimensions of contention; leadership in contention; the role of threat in contention; religion and contention; and contention in the context of demographic and life-course processes.

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Ronald Aminzade is Professor of Sociology at the University of Minnesota. He has also taught at the University of Wisconsin Madison, the University of Lund, and the University of Amsterdam. His research on the political consequences of capitalist development in nineteenth-century France has been published in numerous articles and in two books, Ballots and Barricades and Class, Politics, and Early Industrial Capitalism. He is the co-editor of The Social Worlds of Higher Education, on the sociology of education, and Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics (Cambridge University Press, 2001), on social movements and contentious politics. His current research focuses on nationalism and the politics of economic development in East Africa.

By addressing "contentious politics," the authors mean to cover social movements as they are typically conceived, but they also intend to broaden the subject to include other more episodic forms of transgressive behavior in the political domain. Among them would be trade-union strikes; student, worker, or ethnic protests; peasant uprisings that do not evolve into revolutionary movements; race riots; and "faith-based" efforts to organize opposition to a government's policy or corruption. The authors also address aspects of the phenomenon that have escaped attention until now ("silence"), as well as cognate theories and concepts ("voice") that have not been utilized until now to further social-movement studies.

That the volume, a collected work, is the fruit of an extended collaboration among the authors is evident in the conceptual continuity and cross-referencing of the chapters. Thus Aminzade and McAdam invite the reader to consider the role of emotions in collective mobilization, as well as individual commitment, in an attempt to overcome a rationalist bias in the study of contentious politics. The issue is decidedly not whether participation in contentious politics is based on "rational choice" or "charismatic" attraction, whether it is "instrumental" or "expressive," or whether it is "cultural" or based on a calculus of costs and benefits. The point is to deny the antinomy and recognize that political (or other) acts are invariably a joint product of emotion (passion, feelings, and cravings) and self-conscious rational choices that seek to align ends with means.
Not surprisingly, the same issue appears again in the stimulating chapter by Aminzade and Perry on the sacred, the religious, and the secular in contentious politics. Sewell further takes up the "sacralization and desacralization" of place, as he urges attention to the social construction of locale and the significance of location in contentious politics. They, too, posit a world in which the vectors of emotion and choice intersect and combine with varying degrees of salience and intensity. Earlier reports about the death of religion in a secularizing world seem grossly exaggerated, as movements with secular political and economic ends incorporate, and are energized by, faith-based groups and their cultural dimensions.

Similarly, the discussion by McAdam and Sewell of cycles of protest in the chapter about temporality resonates with the shift from intense affect to emotional "doldrums" in the chapter on emotions. Especially provocative is their plea for proper attention to the significance of the singular transformative event that may at a critical moment overcome those doldrums by posing such a shock to the hegemony of everyday life (such a "threat to the quotidian") as to arouse people to action. Arguably, it is on occasion precisely the hegemonic potential of the quotidian that seduces a movement back into the doldrums, but that eventuality would only reinforce their proposition that temporal cycles are relevant to the study of transgressive collective politics. Other examples appear in Goldstone and Tilly's essay on state responses to popular action, which suggests that under certain conditions state repression intensifies contention.

The book makes a consistent effort throughout to relate macro to micro perspectives as in Goldstone and McAdam's discussion of the relation between macrodemographic pressures and microdemographic (life-course) outcomes and to avoid dichotomous and exclusive antinomies, such as rational versus charismatic action. In that light, however, Aminzade, Goldstone, and Perry's emphasis on the independent effect of leadership in determining the outcome of contentious claims against authority is puzzling. Leadership certainly matters, but unlike the case studies in other chapters, this illustrative case analysis is less convincing, since it seems to take leadership out of its structural context. That caveat notwithstanding, this excellent book is indispensable for those who think there is nothing new in the study of social movements.

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