

Example of research paper on the theories

[Sociology](#), [Identity](#)



There has always been an interest to know what triggers certain collective actions in societies, especially in contentious politics. Governments have always had to deal with social unrest, protests, uprisings and public demonstrations when parts of the population feel they are being oppressed or that the government does not respond to their pleas. However, majorities do not seem to participate actively in political demonstrations. In fact, even massive public manifestations encompass small percentages of populations. In the famous book *The Logic of Collective Action*, Mancur Olson offers a list of conditions that would deter people from participating in collective activities, but says little about the necessary conditions that would push societies into participating. Other theories have offered better explanations of why people engage in contentious politics collectively. This paper will try to find out which theory can better explain the causes of collective action.

In a paper released in 1996, professors of sociology Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, described the three most influential approaches used to explain social movements. They mentioned the structural, the rational and the cultural approach and later developed the ways they were synthesized and integrated.

The first approach is the political opportunity structure which, at first, revolved political struggle. Structuralism focuses on institutions and social relations (classes or roles) that are outside of the sphere of action of actors. This might refer to social layers or class relations, fiscal, military and international factors.

The second approach is one borrowed from the field of economics and the school of Mancur Olson. This take would add elements of rationality to

agents and indicate that individuals with less than enough interest might avoid taking actions if they perceive that others are willing to take them for him . This theory emphasizes too much on material incentives but cannot explain why thousands of people would march or riot on behalf of interests that are not their own, as is the current case in Hong Kong, Venezuela or the USA.

Lastly, the cultural approach started to replace social classes as the moving force of history with collective identities . The literature suggests that the more the people identify with a group that expresses its grievances through an activity, the more likely they are to participate in that activity . There are some problems with this view. People seem to hold multiple and opposing identities that might create situations of conflicting interests. For example, an ethnic group that feels dissatisfied with their leaders might find it difficult to protest against them because they belong to their ethnic group. However, this seems to be normal and even desirable as individuals with dual identities seem to be more satisfied with their situation, but are also more likely to participate in collective action if they feel dissatisfied .

Saturday Mothers

Lately, there have been many cases of political demonstrations made by groups that demand different things from their governments. The Arab Spring, the Occupy Movement, the riots in Ukraine, Hong Kong, Venezuela and Mexico, or the more recent events in the United States. All these movements involve great levels of collective action and social contention, and have appeared almost overnight. Other more pacific movements have had longer lives and are more pacific in nature, but have also had similar

bargaining power. One such movement is the Saturday Mothers in Turkey which has been going on pacifically for decades as a pacific protest against the government for its inaction in the cases of disappearances of hundreds of men between 1992 and 1996.

After the 1980 military coup d'état in Turkey, the government tried to regain total control and strengthen the state by equipping regions that were in state of emergency with extensive authorities to control local guerrillas. During the 1990s the government and regional authorities shifted their attention to other targets such as individuals who refused to defend or execute government policies. While this might be seen as a valid strategy for cutting off logistic support to the guerrilla organization, this soon brought extrajudicial and arbitrary execution and enforced disappearances. Hundreds of men disappeared in a period of four years causing great grief among their families and communities. This was made worse by the fact that they were often the only economic support of their families leaving them in great economic distress. .

There are hundreds of stories of women who mobilized themselves in hopes to find their husbands and sons alive, to get a response from the government or to be just heard by international organizations . Many of them did not have money to move from their villages to urban centers and had to ask their neighbors for transportation money in order to get several times a week to give a statement to representatives of international organizations . In 1995, a group of thirty of these women apparently influenced by actions of groups facing similar problems around the world, such as Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, started to gather and sit every saturday for half an hour at

Galatasaray, Istanbul, holding pictures of the disappeared and loved ones. The government responded with heavy coercion every time they gathered, and in 1999 the repression was so great that it forced the protesters to stop gathering. In 2009 the Saturday Mothers resumed the peaceful protest, and there are now thousands of participants and sympathizers.

The Most Plausible Explanation for Collective Action

It seems that the economic approach does not provide strong arguments for explaining why people engage in collective action. Nothing seems to indicate that the group Saturday Mothers is pursuing any material gain from these protests. Additionally, the people who now support them will not get any benefit from protesting or if the women achieve their goal either, which is just to be recognized as victims, to make changes in the Turkish penal code and to open state files that document the massacres to public review. So the rational/economic approach does not offer a satisfying explanation.

The cultural approach of the political contention theory seems to better explain why these women engaged in collective action. It seems that the idea of unifying identity elements can give an account on why this group has remained active and gaining strength over the years. Other identity elements shared by the wider community might have helped gather support, such as motherhood and sense of justice. But it appears there are details left out by the cultural approach.

The opportunity structure approach can help explain why the mothers stopped gathering for an extended period. There is no certainty but they might have perceived they had no opportunity of changing their situation because the government was being too repressive in 1999, so they went

silent for almost a decade. Their union triggered by identity elements did not fade during that decade, but it remained dormant. The period of democratization could have brought something they perceived as an opportunity to change the structures of government, or at least their chances of succeeding, so individuals engaged in collective action again. Political contention can then be better explained, according to this evidence, by the cultural approach. Apparently, identity elements play a major role in determining why people engage in collective action. However, elements of structuralist theories can help see when people are more prone to engage in collective action. People can feel they need to unite when the group that shares identity elements with them needs to express grievances but, apparently, if they do not perceive there is a chance to be heard or change something, people would be less prone to engage in collective action.

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