Explaining Contentious Politics.
A Case Study of a Failed Theory Development and a Proposal for a Rational Choice Alternative

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I. Introduction

The issue is the **development of theories** in the social sciences.

It seems that many theories in the social sciences – and in sociology in particular – have not been very successful: problems are not solved, and accumulate over time.

Question: **Why is this so**?

What is a „successful" theory?

I call a theory „successful":

- if it is <u>clear</u> in regard to its
    - concepts and causal structure,
- if there are no or few <u>falsifications</u>, and
- if the theory has a high <u>explanatory power</u>, i.e.
    - it can explain a relatively <u>large class of phenomena</u> (e.g. social action or crime),
    - it can explain relatively <u>specific phenomena</u> of its explanatory domain (not crime in general but specific kinds of crime),
   - it has a wide <u>range of application</u>.

There are **different answers** to the question of why the development of theories is often not successful, e.g.:

- reality is too **complex.**

- There are **no laws** in the social world.

- Social scientists are a **negative selection**: they are not intelligent enough – the most intelligent students become natural scientists.

In what follows I will discuss another possible answer:

Social scientists ignore certain methodological rules. Compliance with these rule would contribute to a successful theory development.
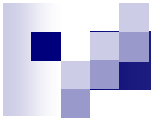
I will examine this claim by analyzing a specific example:
I will look at **theories of political protest and social movements**.

The presentation is organized as follows:

- What are the **methodological rules** for a successful theory development?
- Theories of political protest and social movements
    - The **theory of collective action**
    - The **resource-mobilization perspective**
    - **Political opportunity structures perspective**
    - The subjective turn:
        - The **framing perspective**
        - The **identity appraoch**
    - **Conclusion**: the unresolved problems
    - The "**solution**" of the problems: abandoning theories
        - **Factor explanations**
        - The **dynamics of contention approach**
- A proposal for the **integration** of the approaches
- **What can we learn from the failed theory development?**

II. What could a successful theory development look like?

- Starting point: **emergence of a new theoretical idea.**
- A first **improvement**: increase of explanatory power, clarifcation of the concepts and the structure of the theory, perhaps modification.
- **Empirical tests.**
- **If there are problems:**
  - ☐ modification (or a proposal of a new "revolutionary" theory),
  - ☐ new tests,
  - ☐ perhaps again a modification or design of a new theory,
  - ☐ new tests,
  - ☐ perhaps again modification **and so on** (<u>**trial and error**</u>).
  - ☐ For some time there could exist <u>several alternative theories</u> for which there should be a COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION AND TEST.
- **Result:** there is a clear theory whose problems are regarded as solved – for the time being.

To what extent did the development of <u>theories of political protests and social movements</u> conform to this pattern?

The basis for the following presentation is:

Karl-Dieter Opp. 2009.
Theories of Political Protest
and Social Movements. A
Multidisciplinary Introduction,
Critique, and Synthesis.
London und New York:
Routledge

The book includes an outline of the
different approaches, their critique
and synthesis, but the **problem
addressed in this presentation is
not discussed in the book.**
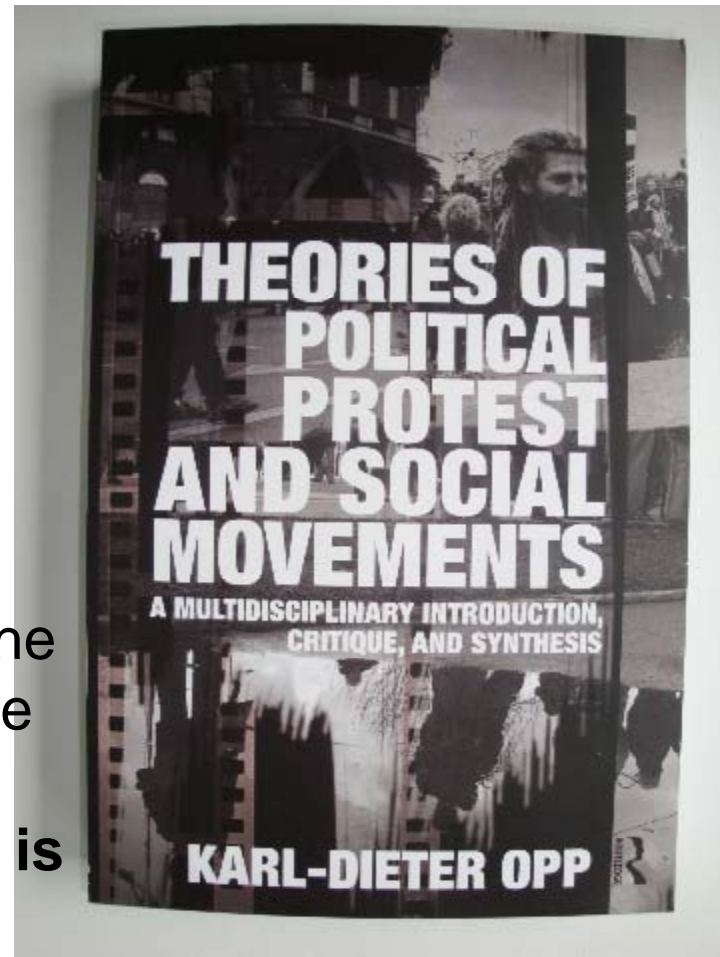
III. How everything began: the theory of collective action (1965) and its rejection

The new theoretical development began with Mancur Olson's "Logic of Collective Action" from 1965.

Outline of the theory:

Question: under what conditions do indiuals with a common goal act in order to achieve their goal (i.e. contribute to the provision of **public goods**)? Important: every group member can consume them – free rider problem?

Protest is a form of collective action so that the theory can also be applied to explain protest.

Olson's contribution can be described in the following way:

- He applies a **general theory of action:** rational choice theory.

- Olson outlines a **micro model** to **explain the individual contribution to the provision of public goods. The important variables are**:

  - Intensity of the <u>preference</u> for the public good and individual <u>influence</u> on its provision (**public goods incentives**) and

  - **selective incentives** which only occur if an individual contributes or does not contribute (reward in case of contribution / punishment in case of non-contribution) – in contrast to the public good.

- Olson provides an extensive discussion of a **macro hypothesis**: group size reduces the likelihood that a public good is provided.

- Olson outlines an **explanation of the macro proposition, i.e. a <u>micro-macro model</u>:**

Group-size   Negative Correlation   Provision of the public good

Incentives (e.g. individual influence) ⟶ Individual contribution to the public good
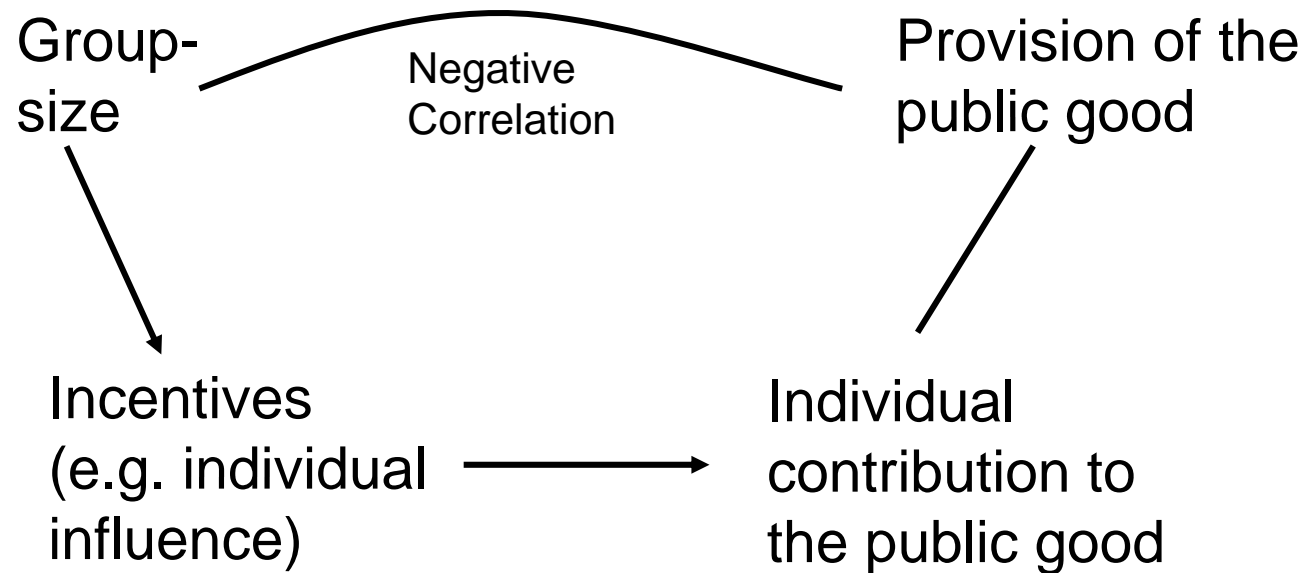
Example: Contribution to environmental protection in large groups.

This theory has been **<u>rejected</u>** by sociologists. Reasons:

- **Applied general theory of action:** the neo-classical homo oeconomicus was criticized: individuals are not "rational", norms are not taken account of etc.

- **Micro model for collective action**: it does not include relevant factors like "solidarity" and norms.

- **Macro proposition:** the group size proposition is wrong, and group size is not the only relevant macro variable.

- **Micro-macro model:** It was never criticized in detail. The reason is probably that the model is not formulated explicitly, it has to be reconstructed.

IV. The theoretical approaches for the explanation of political protest and social movements in sociology

In the following the basic ideas of the approaches as well their major problems are outlined.

1977: The resource-mobilization perspective (RMP) – central articly by McCarthy und Zald 1977

Question: how can the <u>origin, change and success of social movements</u> be explained?

Theoretical idea: **External support** of a movement by important societal groups and other **resources** which can be mobilized are most important factors.

Beginning of the 80s: the political opportunity structure (POS) perspective

The **central article** was written by Peter Eisinger in 1973, but the perspective was only adopted at the beginning of the 80s.

Question: Explanation of protest and social movements.

Theoretical idea: Features of the political system like "governmental responsiveness" if they increase the "**chances of success of citizen political activity**" are important factors for the emergence of protest and social movements.

Mid 80s: the subjective turn

Critique of the RMP and POS: subjective factors are missing.

Solution 1: the framing approach – basic article by Snow et. al. 1986

Question: focus on the explanation of individual protests.

Theoretical idea: the mobilization of individuals depends on the extent to which the **"frames" of unmobilized individuals on the on hand and social movements on the other are aligned ("frame alignment").**

Solution 2: the identity appraoch – central article by Melucci 1988.

Question: mainly the explanation of individual protests, but also of collective action.

Theoretical idea: identity or collective identity are of great importance for the explanation of protest and collective action.

V. General problems of the theoretical development

➡ **Each** sociological perspective is burdened with several **problems.**

Example: the POS perspective

➡ **Conceptual problems:** how does one ascertain the objective probability that changes in the political environment change the „chances of success of political action"?

➡ **Explanatory content**: What kind of changes of POS lead to which form of political action?

➡ **Validity**: Example: an increase of political opportunities – whatever this means – does not lead to more protest if the incentives that the POS changes are not strong enough.

For most of the approaches the **structure of the theoretical propositions** is not even clear.

There is no perspective whose **problems are solved over time** – there are not even systematic attempts to solve these problems (e.g. clarify propositions and concepts, test the propositions, modify them etc.) – although there is an extensive literature for each approach.

There is no approch that has solved the **problems of the preceding approaches**.

The **relationships to the preceding approaches** are not discussed either.

There is an **implicit micro-macro orientation** in each approach! In other words:

⇨ Each approach applies an **implicit general theory of action**, which is a version of the theory of rational action – even in qualitative approaches (framing and identity approach).

⇨ In all approaches we find an **implicit micro model of political protest** which is not specified in detail.

⇨ All approaches include hypotheses about the effects of the macro on the micro level, i.e. a **micro-macro model**, which – again – is **not spelled out**.

There is **no comparative theory discussion**. Instead, there is a **peaceful co-existence** of the theoretical approaches.

"**Paradigm warfare**" – the expression is from Tarrow 2004 – is explicitly rejected by social movement scholars!

THUS: Over time, problems are not solved; instead there is a **problem accumulation!**

VI. Two "solutions" of the problems: the abandonment of theory

Social movement scholars are **dissatisfied** with the state of theory. What is the reaction?

The **strategy** adopted by most social movement scholars is: if you don't achieve your goal – a good theory – then give up, i.e. abandon the goal!

Two a-theoretical "solutions" were adopted which renounce the application of theories:

- factor explanations and
- recourse to "mechanisms" instead of applying theories.

VII. Outline of a synthesis: the structural-cognitive model

What can be done in such a situation?

If all approaches **implicitly** apply micro-macro modeling, it is worth trying to focus on this kind of theory building **explicitly**.
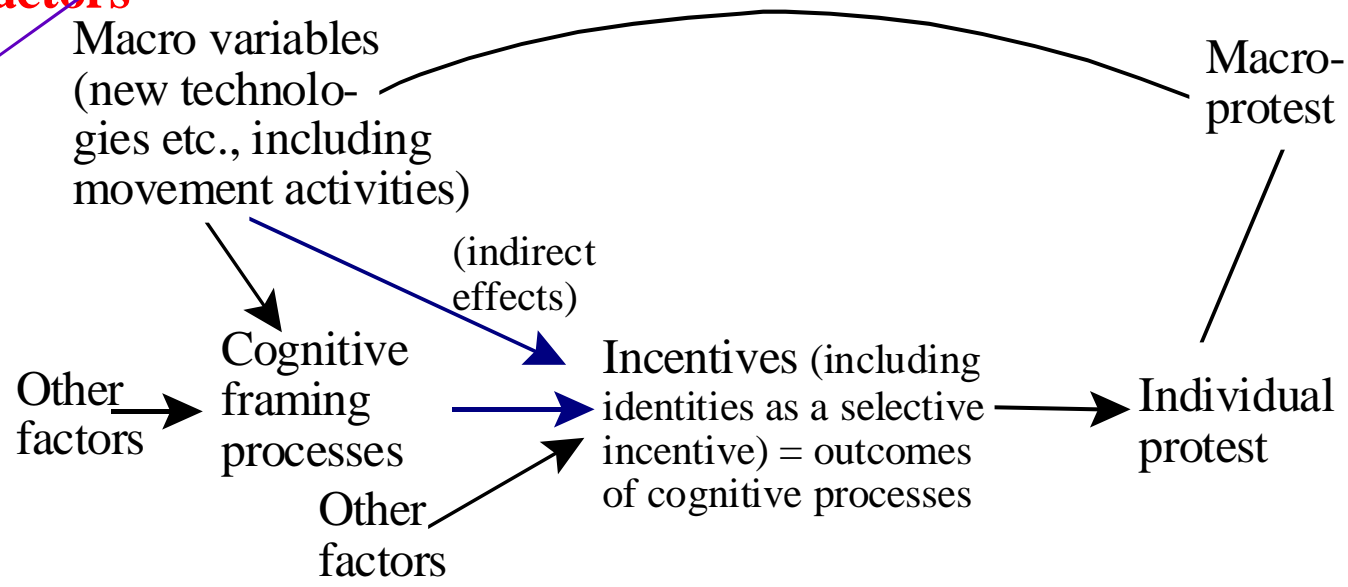
Such a research program could **build on the theory of collective action – THAT WAS IGNORED BY SOCIOLOGISTS!**

One could proceed in several steps:

The structural-cognitive model:

2. Selection of macro factors

Macro variables (new technolo-gies etc., including movement activities)

Macro-protest

3. Explicit micro-macro modeling

(indirect effects)

Other factors

Cognitive framing processes

Other factors

Incentives (including identities as a selective incentive) = outcomes of cognitive processes

Individual protest

1. Integration of micro-models (collective action, identity, framing), based on a general theory of action

XI. What can we learn from this failed theory development?

Let us compare the „ideal" theory development with the theory development in the field of protest and social movements:

Ideal development:

- **Proposal of some theoretical idea**
- **Improvement** (Increase of explanatory content, clarification, modification)
- **Empirical tests / modification** or suggestion of a better alternative / new tests, modification...

- There exists a **clear (axiomatic) theory** whose problems are regarded as solved – for the time being **= integrative theory development.** (Perhaps there exist sometimes several competing theories for which comparative tests have been conducted.)

Real development:

- **Proposal** of some theoretical idea
- Many **other new and vague theoretical ideas** are developed.
- **Empirical tests** of single hypotheses / **modifications** of single hypotheses and developement of single hypotheses.
- There is **NO clear (axiomatic) theory** whose problems are regarded as solved – for the time being. (There are not several clear competing theories either that have been tested by crucial investigations = **disintegrative theory development**. (There are many single vague theories, and nobody knows how they are related.)

How can such a **desintegrative theory development** – time and again new theories are developed without referring to existing theories – **be explained**?

Scientists who **suggest a new theory** gain **reputation** (high standing in the profession, invitation to talks, offers of attractive positions) – these are major goals of most member of the scientific community.

Since there are **no enforced rules for an integrative theory development** <u>reputation gain</u> **is the central incentive for providing the kind of „theories" described before.**

Recent examples: DBO-theory by P. Hedström (2005) ... and...?

Perhaps there are **arguments for the procedures described before?**

Further research: Did **other theories** take the same development? Anomie theory? Status inconsistency theory? The theory of cognitive dissonance?

Conclusion: The failed theory development described before suggests that it could have been (largely?) avoided if some simple rules of theory construction had been applied. It is plausible that this holds for other theories as well!

Thank you for not falling asleep at that time of the day!