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Collective Political Action

*A Research Program and Some of Its Results**

Abstract: This paper describes a research program that focuses on the explanation of political protest and its causes. The starting point is Mancur Olson's theory of collective action. This theory is modified, extended and applied to explain political protest. In particular, it is argued that only a wide version of Rational Choice theory that includes 'soft' incentives as well as misperception is capable of providing valid explanations of protest behavior. Another part of the research program is the utilization of survey research to test the predictions about protest behavior that are generated from the wide version of Rational Choice theory. The research program further aims at (a) comparing empirically Rational Choice and alternative propositions, (b) providing micro-macro explanatory models, (c) dynamic theoretical models, and (d) explaining preferences and beliefs which are usually treated as exogenous variables. The paper further reports some results of the research program.

1. Introduction

Mancur Olson's theory of collective action advanced in his book *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965) is among the few testable theories with high explanatory power in the social sciences that has generated a vast number of empirical as well as theoretical research over decades. Although the theory is still debated the following general assessment will be shared by many social scientists: "... since the publication of Mancur Olson's book there has been a whole series of advances in our understanding of collective action, a cumulative progress rare in the social

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sciences" (Taylor/Singleton 1993, 195).[1] Nonetheless, the still growing literature on the theory indicates that there are many unresolved problems. It is thus no surprise that there is also a vast number of critical assessments of the theory.[2] These critiques range from out-of-hand rejections (see, e.g., Kim/Bearman 1997) to detailed criticism that is often constructive in the sense that specific improvements are suggested which are based on empirical research. Most contributions to the theory of collective action pertain to the latter type of work. This paper takes the position that Olson's theory has high explanatory power and provides valid explanations for a vast number of phenomena. However, there are also several weaknesses. They gave rise to a research program that this author is involved in for about two decades.[3] This article sets out some of these weaknesses and describes a research program that was designed to improve the theory of collective action. In describing this program some results of the empirical studies that were carried out to test modifications and extensions of Olson's theory will be mentioned in passing.[4]

2. The Starting Point: Why Do People Participate in Protest Action?

The research program started with a substantive explanatory problem that this author was concerned with in the mid-seventies: why do people engage in protest action such as participation in demonstrations, blocking streets or wearing buttons with political slogans? The answers of sociologists provided at that time were not satisfactory, and they are not satisfactory either today.[5] I will outline major deficiencies of the sociological approaches later on. Instead of applying or improving sociological theories of the middle range it seemed preferable to generate testable predictions about protest by applying a general theory of action. The theory of rational action – henceforth called "Rational Choice Theory" (RCT) – was an obvious candidate to be applied for several reasons. First, it was applied by sociologists, especially in the tradition of George C. Homans,

[1] For detailed discussions of the theory see Sandler 1992; Udehn 1993; 1996.

[2] See, e.g., several of the recent volumes that criticize public choice theory, which includes Olson's theory, such as Green/Shapiro 1994 (and Friedman 1995 with a collection of essays that discuss the critique of Green and Shapiro); Monroe 1991; Udehn 1996.

[3] This program began with a theoretical treatise (Opp 1978). A secondary data analysis (Opp et al. 1981) followed. In a next step several empirical investigations were designed to test various propositions of the research program. The following books are an outgrowth of the research program: Opp et al. 1984; Opp 1989; Opp/Roehl 1990a; Opp et al. 1993 (English translation Opp et al. 1995b); Opp 1997. Articles in English are: Muller/Opp 1986; Opp 1986; Opp 1988; Finkel et al. 1989; Opp 1990a; Opp 1990b; Opp/Roehl 1990b; Finkel/Opp 1991; Opp 1991b; Opp 1993; Opp/Gern 1993; Opp 1994; Wolfsfeld et al. 1994; Opp et al. 1995a; Jasso/Opp 1997; Opp 1998a; Opp 1998c; Opp 1998d; Opp 2000; Opp 2001c. Some features of the research program are also discussed in Opp 1990b; 1998a. Further work that is explicitly based on this research program is Baumgärtner 1991 and Vogt 1995.

[4] A brief summary of the major ingredients of the research program is provided below in the section "Summary of the Research Program" – which is for readers who are in a hurry.

[5] For overviews of sociological contributions to explaining protest and social movements see, e.g., Della Porta/Diani 1999; Hellmann/Koopmans 1998; McAdam/Snow 1997.

as well as by a large number of other social scientists – economists and political scientists in particular – to explain various kinds of collective behavior. Protest is a kind of collective behavior. RCT is thus in principle apt to explain protest action. Second, the critics of this theory did not provide a better alternative, and the theory seemed rather successful in explaining a great many social phenomena. It seemed thus reasonable to apply it also to explain protest behavior. Third, in order to explain protest one need not begin on scratch: there was already a full-fledged theory of collective action, based on RCT that was espoused in the work of Mancur Olson (1965). At first sight, it seemed that this theory could immediately be applied to explain protest. The theory explains when people contribute to provide public goods. The protesters' goals are public goods (such as terminating the use of nuclear power, reducing pollution or preventing various political decisions such as building new highways through residential areas).[6] Protests are contributions to provide these goods. To be sure, participating in protest action is different from most other contributions to the provision of a public good because protesters do not themselves produce the public good but put pressure on others such as governments to provide it. However, the theory is not restricted to explain only certain kinds of contributions so that it can be applied to explain protest as well. However, a closer look indicated that the theory was burdened with several problems. These problems and the research program that was designed to remedy these problems will be outlined in the following sections.

3. Soft Incentives, Misperception and the Theory of Rational Action

How would an explanation of protest look like if we apply Olson's theory? The public goods most protesters wish to be provided can only be produced if a large number of people participate in putting pressure on a government. The single member of such a group has only a negligible impact to bring about the public good. For example, one out of 100,000 demonstrators will not have any noticeable impact on prompting a government to provide a public good. It is thus of no avail to participate because the production of the public good cannot be influenced by the participation of a single individual. In addition, participants incur costs when they participate such as the time spent at the demonstration. This time could be used for other activities that provide more benefits than participating in a demonstration. The preference for a public good will thus not prompt individuals to participate. However, there may be other benefits or costs that obtain when individuals participate or do not participate. These are, by definition, selective incentives. For example, unions provide not only public goods such as higher wages for employees; they further offer special benefits, i.e. positive selective incentives, such as cheap insurances or legal advice for those

[6] A public good is defined as any good that every member of a group can enjoy if it is provided, even if a member has not contributed to its provision. Examples for public goods are laws, a clean environment, or public safety.

who join them and thus contribute to the provision of the public good (or goods). These benefits may be so high that they outweigh the costs of contributing and, thus, prompt individuals to become union members and to participate in the provision of the public good.

Two problems arise when this reasoning is applied to explain political protest. One problem concerns Olson's assumption that the actual impact an individual has on the provision of a public good in a large group is negligible. This is certainly correct from the point of view of an observer. But do protesters perceive the situation as it actually is? A first indication that this is not the case are conversations with protesters. We often asked them in our qualitative interviews whether it would not be better for them to stay at home because their participation would not make a difference anyway. The common reaction to this question was anger: protesters definitely thought that they could contribute to the provision of a public good. It thus seems that actual influence is misperceived, i.e. overestimated. Various surveys confirm this: interview questions that try to tap the extent to which people think they are politically influential when they protest indicate that average influence of the population is not zero and that there is a wide variation in perceived political influence.[7]

This finding has an important implication for explaining political action and political protest in particular. If individuals regard themselves as influential even in a large group, then public goods preferences, i.e. discontent with the extent to which a public good is provided, are an incentive for protest participation. Thus, if influence is not zero protest participation becomes more likely if discontent is high. This prediction is confirmed by several empirical studies (see the references in the previous footnote).

The other problem of applying Olson's theory to explain protest is that the selective incentives Olson considers are not provided to protesters: they don't get cheap insurances or other material or tangible incentives when they participate. Does this mean that protesters don't get selective incentives at all? Conversations with protesters suggest that their participation is triggered by very elusive motivations that proponents of the theory of collective action are reluctant to count as incentives at all. For example, people may feel an obligation to participate or there may be a chance to meet nice people at the demonstration venue. Furthermore, if people have friends who share the concern for a public good the members of such a social network reward each other for participation, and there is disapproval for staying at home. Thus, it seems that *moral incentives* (i.e. the felt obligation to participate in protest) as well as *social incentives* (i.e. various kinds of actual and expected social rewards in case of participation or punishment in case of non-participation) affect participation in protest action. We measured these incentives in our empirical studies. Multivariate analyses in which these factors were included as independent variables suggest that they have significant effects on protest participation.[8]

The previous theoretical argument raises a general theoretical problem.

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[7] See, e.g., Finkel et al. 1989; Gibson 1991; Moe 1980; Muller/Opp 1986; Opp 1988; 1989; 2001a; 2001b.

[8] For the effects of *moral incentives* see, e.g., Chong 1991, 93–100; Marwell/Ames 1979;

Olson's theory of collective action is based on RCT. Assume that protest participation can be explained by public goods preferences and the perception that one's contribution makes a difference, by moral and social incentives. Is this really a rational choice explanation? A standard argument of many proponents of RCT is that such explanations are completely ad hoc and arbitrary. RCT includes tangible incentives such as repression or money and not elusive phenomena such as moral norms or social rewards. The assumption of misperception is also regarded as ad hoc: the common assumption is that in general reality is perceived correctly. There may be misperceptions, it is argued, but they are corrected over time because misperceiving reality is costly. The question thus is whether the explanatory argument outlined before is a rational choice explanation.

Our position is that RCT is a general theory of action. It posits that preferences and constraints are the major factors that determine behavior, and that people try to achieve those outcomes that are best for them, given the constraints they face. This is the general or, as we prefer to say, wide version of RCT. Ostrom (1998) has aptly characterized this version in the following way: "Consistent with all models of rational choice is a general theory of human behavior that views all humans as complex, fallible learners who seek to do as well as they can given the constraints that they face and who are able to learn heuristics, norms, rules, and how to craft rules to improve achieved outcomes." (9) Thus, all kinds of preferences may affect human behavior. These preferences may consist of following rules, getting social rewards from reference persons or getting material private goods such as cheap insurances. Furthermore, people's perception of the situation is relevant. For example, in deciding whether I will participate in a demonstration it is of importance whether I think that my participation makes a difference and not whether the participation actually makes a difference. This wide version of RCT is compatible with the assumption of bounded rationality (see, e.g., Simon 1985).

Proponents of RCT are divided on the issue whether such a wide version of RCT or whether a narrow version is more appropriate. The latter would assume that only palpable incentives matter and that reality is, by and large, perceived correctly. I have defended a wide version in a recent article (Opp 1999a) where I discuss in detail the arguments in favor and against it. I will only mention one major argument that is used by opponents of a wide version: it is held that introducing soft incentives such as norms and allowing for misperception is ad hoc and makes the theory tautological. The charge is that it cannot be determined whether people have norms, are altruistic or misperceive reality. These factors can thus always be invoked if a phenomenon is to be explained, and it is not possible to provide any evidence that is independent of the behavior to be explained. For example, the question of why person A participated in a demonstration could be answered by pointing out that A thought his participation would make a difference. How do I know this? The answer could be: don't you see that A participated? The argument that no evidence can be provided for the existence of soft incentives and misperception is clearly wrong. A major feature

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Muller 1979; Opp 1986; 1989. For the effects of *social incentives* see, e.g., Klandermans 1984; McAdam/Paulsen 1993; Opp/Gern 1993.

of the research program this paper focuses on is that soft incentives and misperception are measured by the standard methods of empirical research. Thus, it is not simply assumed that protest norms or an overestimation of political influence prompt people to protest. Simply postulating this would, of course, be ad hoc. Instead, one of the major ingredients of the research program is to provide empirical evidence for such claims – see the next section. The previous argument implies that a wide version of RCT is not tautological (or, more precisely, analytically true) either. If a theory can be tested and, thus, can be wrong it cannot be tautological.

4. Testing Rational Choice Theory in Natural Situations by Survey Research

The research program that this paper focuses on did not only endeavor to explain protest action by applying RCT but further aimed at testing the explanatory arguments empirically. This is not at all obvious for proponents of RCT. For example, Laver (1997, 4) argues: "The essential purpose of the rational choice approach is thus to construct a logically coherent potential explanation of the phenomenon under investigation. Empirical validity is always welcome, of course, but it is not the primary motivation." We do not share this position but believe that not only the construction of a rational choice explanation but also its empirical test are of equal and central importance. How could we otherwise find out to what extent a rational choice explanation is borne out by the facts and how it fares in comparison to alternative explanations?

If empirical testing is regarded as important the question arises what research designs are appropriate. Many scholars working in the rational choice tradition use experimental designs to test their propositions. Protest behavior occurs in natural situations. To be sure, it may be possible to test certain implications of a theory of protest in experimental settings (see, e.g., Snijders/Raub 1998). But a theory that refers to real life phenomena should also be tested in real life situations. If this is accepted the question arises what method is most suitable. A test of a theory of protest must ascertain subjective phenomena such as beliefs (e.g., perceived political influence) and preferences (political discontent or the extent to which people accept protest norms) as well as objective phenomena such as membership in groups or in networks of friends. In order to measure subjective as well as objective social phenomena a research design would be most appropriate that combines survey research and observation. But such a design turned out to be very complicated and costly: interviewing samples of, say, 500 respondents and observing their behavior over a year or so would not only be technically difficult but very expensive as well. It seemed most reasonable to test the theoretical propositions by survey research. The idea is simple: if you want to know what people want and what they believe then ask them.

In regard to measuring objective phenomena, it does not seem problematic to measure phenomena such as present group memberships. It is more problematic to measure past protest behavior by retrospective questions. In doing so we

presented respondents with a list of protest behaviors (such as participating in political demonstrations, working in a protest group) and asked them for each behavior whether they never considered to participate, considered to participate and did not participate, participated once or participated several times. This question refers to activities in the past two years. It is plausible that the answers to such retrospective questions are reliable because participating in protest does not occur often and is an uncommon activity that people will remember. However, reporting past protest behavior might be unpleasant or subject to social desirability. We therefore asked the questions about protest participation in a separate questionnaire that the respondent filled out, put in an envelope, sealed and passed to the interviewer so that the interviewer could not see the answers.

Proponents of RCT are particularly skeptical about testing RCT theory by survey research. Some of the problems such as the validity of respondents' answers exist for every survey and are thus not specific for investigations that test RCT. As the previous paragraph indicates, there are various strategies to increase the validity and reliability of surveys. We took great care to phrase the questions so that respondents can understand them, and we measured variables such as political discontent by using batteries of questions and mostly not single questions in order to improve the reliability of the answers. For all questionnaires, extensive pretests were carried out. We are thus confident that the information elicited by our questionnaires reflect the actual preferences, beliefs, behaviors and other properties of the respondents.[9]

One major argument against using survey research to test RCT is that utility cannot be measured at all (or at best only in experimental settings). In refuting this argument we refer to the vast number of studies by social psychologists that test value expectancy or similar theories which pertain to the family of RCT. "Utility" is seen here as referring to human motives that can be tapped by asking people.[10] We thus do not subscribe to a view that the variables of RCT are not accessible to direct measurement in surveys.

In order to avoid misunderstandings I would like to emphasize that we do not ask our respondents why they participated. Thus, our research is not based on a *reason analysis* in which the researcher asks individuals whether certain incentives were related to the performance of their actions. Instead, we ascertain factors such as membership of various groups, acceptance of protest norms or perceived influence and then examine the effect of these factors on protest behavior. This kind of analysis may be called *impact analysis* which is based on the idea that the researcher measures certain incentives and then tests whether these incentives have an impact on the action to be explained.

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[9] For a detailed discussion of the arguments for and against testing RCT and in particular a rational choice theory of protest by survey research see Opp 1998a.

[10] For a discussion of this argument see Opp 1998a.

5. Testing the Theory of Collective Action and Alternative Theories

Most sociologists who work in the field of social movements and political protest do not subscribe to RCT. Advocates of a research program focusing on applying RCT are faced with the question of why they think that RCT is superior to alternative approaches. Tackling this question is another part of the research program. This question is addressed in two steps. Comparing RCT with alternative approaches first requires *theoretical analyses* that ascertain the exact differences between rational choice propositions and alternative propositions. To illustrate, one of the major approaches to explain social movements and protest are the resource mobilization (RM) and political opportunity structure (POS) perspectives.[11] The basic idea of the RM perspective is that social movements compete for resources such as the support by other groups. The more successful social movements are in acquiring resources the higher is the level of protest. The POS perspective holds that an increase of political opportunities raises the level of political protest in a society. These approaches have been criticized on various grounds – see the references in the previous footnote. From a rational choice perspective, it is first necessary to compare the meaning of the terms "resources" and "opportunities" with the meaning of the variables of RCT. In doing so one has to conclude that those concepts refer to what rational choice theorists call "constraints". From a rational choice perspective, this implies that RM and POS theory are an incomplete version of RCT because they include just one factor. It thus seems that RM-POS proponents implicitly apply RCT. It is not clear why they do not apply the underlying theory in a systematic way and generate more satisfactory explanatory models. Furthermore, a basic question remains unanswered: assume for a moment that changing resources and opportunities change protest; how does this change come about, i.e. what are the mechanisms on the micro-level that are set in motion by changing resources and opportunities so that collective protest arises?

More recently, alternative perspectives to the RM and POS perspective have been developed which emphasize cultural factors, collective identity and framing processes.[12] So far these approaches do not yet have the status of full-fledged theories. They are more like orienting hypotheses (Merton 1957, ch. 2). These approaches have a clear anti-rational choice thrust. One problem is that it is not clear what the testable alternative propositions are. A detailed theoretical analysis of the meaning of terms like culture, framing, collective identity is a necessary requirement to compare these approaches to RCT. Such an analysis will show whether rational choice variables refer to other phenomena than the variables those approaches focus on. A problem of the anti-rational choice position is that

[11] The basic reference of the *opportunity structure perspective* is Eisinger 1973. His ideas have been modified and expanded. See, with further references, McAdam et al. 1996. For a critique see also Opp 1996b. Basic articles of the *resource mobilization perspective* are included in Zald/McCarthy 1987. For a summary and discussion of the basic ideas see Buechler 1993; Jenkins 1983; Opp 1998b; Piven/Cloward 1991.

[12] See, e.g., Johnston/Klandermans 1995; Morris/McClurg-Mueller 1992.

we often find critiques of a very narrow version that is then regarded as 'the' RCT, and that the critiques are to a large extent based on misunderstandings.

After theoretical analyses have been carried out the ground is laid for the second step of comparing a rational choice theory of collective action with alternative approaches: this step consists of a *comparative empirical test* of RCT and alternative propositions. This means that it is examined empirically whether propositions derived from RCT or alternative propositions are better confirmed in empirical research. To illustrate, assume that RCT predicts that certain incentives of type R are the major variables that instigate protest, whereas another theory claims that an alternative set of variables of type A is relevant. To validate these claims the variables R and A must be measured in a given research project. Multivariate analyses with protest as a dependent and the two sets of variables R and A as independent variables can then show what set of variables provides a better explanation of protest.

Let us illustrate these considerations with two examples. Ronald Inglehart posits that postmaterialist value orientations are the causal factors that best explain protest behavior. Is this an alternative to a Rational Choice Theory of protest? A detailed theoretical analysis of the meanings of the terms "materialist/postmaterialist value orientation" reveals that these terms refer to kinds of public goods. This 'theory' is nonetheless inconsistent with a Rational Choice explanation because the latter would suggest that not only one public good preference leads to protest. A regression analysis that includes this variable and other incentive variables that are based on RCT shows, among other things, that postmaterialism has only a small effect on legal protest, compared with other Rational Choice variables; furthermore, postmaterialism has no effect on illegal protest (for details see Opp 1990a). Thus, a full-fledged Rational Choice explanation is superior.

It is not necessarily the case that Rational Choice variables and variables of other theories overlap. A detailed analysis of the meaning of the terms of the theories is necessary to find out whether different terminologies hide similar or identical meanings.[13] An example of a theoretical proposition whose variables do not overlap with Rational Choice variables is the assumption that integration in groups generates protest. In contrast, RCT posits that incentives are the major variables that cause protest behavior. These conflicting explanations can be examined if three multivariate models are compared in which the dependent variable is protest behavior: (1) a model that includes only group integration variables (such as membership in alternative groups, in hobby and sports groups, and in interest groups); (2) a model that includes only incentive variables based on RCT (such as political discontent and perceived influence, moral and social incentives); (3) a full model with both sets of variables. If multivariate regression analyses show that significant effects of group integration on protest of model 1 are clearly attenuated in model 3 and that the coefficients of the Rational Choice

[13] For another example that illustrates this point see the analysis of the relation between theories of relative deprivation and Rational Choice theory in Opp 1989, chapter 6. See also a test of the effects of personality traits and the incentives to protest mentioned before in Opp 1997.

variables in model 3 are largely stable (compared to model 2) the Rational Choice model is superior. In other words, the Rational Choice model can explain why there is a relation between group integration and protest: not integration per se matters; integration affects protest only if integration correlates with incentive variables (for details see Opp 1989, ch. 5).

If propositions are rather clear it is not difficult to perform empirical comparative theory testing. It is more difficult to provide comparative empirical tests of other theories such as identity theory on the one hand and Rational Choice hypotheses on the other because, as already indicated, major theories of political action are rather vague so that they have to be reconstructed before they can be tested.

6. Social Structure, Incentives and Collective Political Action. Linking the Micro- and Macro-Level

Most scholars who work in the field of collective political action are concerned with macro-propositions. Major theoretical perspectives assume that certain aspects of the social structure affect mass-political action such as political protest. It is predicated, for example, that inequality breeds political violence (see, e.g., Muller 1985; 1987). A rational choice approach would not deny that such macro-propositions are interesting. However, proponents of RCT are not content with propositions that focus on relations between macro-variables. A proponent of RCT would argue that macro-relations are no lawful statements but hold only under certain conditions. To illustrate, assume we find that in a certain country inequality increased for about a decade and that this increase is accompanied by a growth of political violence. An advocate of RCT would try to explain this relation by applying RCT. Such an explanation may read as follows. Assume that the rise of inequality led to an increase of political discontent. Let this increase of discontent occur in a country with a dense network of protesters. The rising discontent leads to moral indignation which, in turn, prompts the members of these networks to reward those who intend to and then do participate in protest actions – especially demonstrations – that demand measures to abet equality. Thus, the increasing inequality has led to an increase of moral and social incentives for participation. Furthermore, assume that the dense networks of protesters consist of many political entrepreneurs (see Frohlich/Oppenheimer/Young 1971; Popkin 1988) who bear part of the costs of organizing collective political action and provide other positive incentives to participants. Political entrepreneurs are leaders of protest movements or intellectuals from the 'alternative' scene. Political entrepreneurs may see opportunities to gain status and receive other rewards when they organize collective political action intended to create more equality. They will thus wage mobilization processes that lower the costs of participation for ordinary citizens. The political entrepreneurs may further convince the citizens that participation of each single citizen is necessary for the joint success. Their campaigns thus increase perceived political influence. This increased influence, in conjunction with discontent, further increases the willingness to protest. We

further assume that the political entrepreneurs convince the citizens that only *violent* forms of political action will be successful, and that these are morally justified. Thus, increased inequality raised the individual incentives to violent protest. Political entrepreneurs coordinated the protests so that *collective* political action emerged.

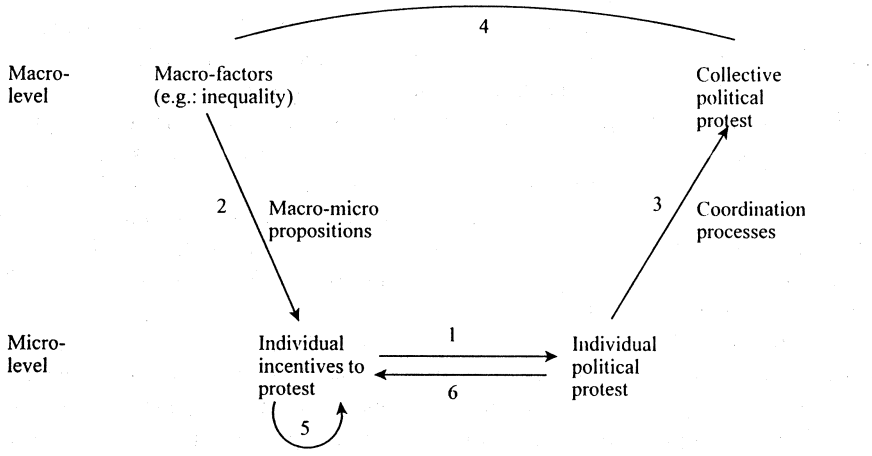
This example illustrates several important points. (1) It is not to be expected that an increase in inequality always evokes mass-political action. In the previous example, it was assumed that an increase in inequality raised, among other things, discontent. This need not be the case: if a society has been a former communist state with high equality an increase of inequality may be regarded as just so that people are not dissatisfied. But assume that increasing inequality has aroused discontent. If we imagine a society without a network of protesters and without the existence of political entrepreneurs protest becomes less likely. The important point is that the macro-proposition holds only under certain conditions and that applying RCT enables us to specify these conditions. This holds for all macro-propositions.

(2) The example assumes that citizens were willing to protest and that political entrepreneurs coordinated the protests so that *collective* protest occurred. In other words, political entrepreneurs provided certain incentives that transformed the willingness to participate in collective political action. This is the way how protests come about in western style democracies. But there are other mechanisms. An organization of large-scale political action by opposition leaders is not possible in a dictatorship. The breakdown of several former communist states was spawned by large-scale *spontaneous* political protests, that is to say, by protests that were not organized by individuals or groups. This holds, for example, for the large-scale Monday demonstration on the Karl Marx Square in Leipzig in 1989 (for an explanation see Opp 1991a; Opp 1993; Opp/Gern 1993; Opp et al. 1993; 1995). The general question thus is under what conditions individual protest actions are *coordinated* in what way so that collective political action arises. This problem is central to a rational choice approach because the idea of methodological individualism is to explain collective action by the aggregate outcomes of individual action. In regard to collective *political* action the explanatory problem is how people coordinate their effort to bring about collective actions such as a demonstration or an anti-abortion campaign.

(3) The example illustrates the logical structure of a micro-macro explanation that is depicted in Figure 1. The starting point is a hypothesis about a macro-relation – see arrow 4 in Figure 1. It is important to note that this relation is no causal relation but a correlation because the relation is explained by other variables. Explaining the relation first requires a micro-theory of political protest (see arrow 1). This theory specifies under what conditions individuals protest. To explain why a macro-proposition such as 'inequality leads to protest' holds we must further know how the macro-factors affect the individual incentives to protest – see arrow 2 of Figure 1. We thus need macro-micro propositions. The final step is to explain how protests are coordinated – see arrow 3 of Figure 1. This completes the explanation of a macro-relation. If only a protest such as a

demonstration and not a macro- relation is to be explained then arrows 4 and 2 are to be deleted. Arrows 5 and 6 will be discussed later.

Figure 1: The Relationship between the Macro- and Micro-Propositions in Models about Political Protest



Note: Arrows symbolize causal relationships, the curve denotes a correlation.

The research program described in this paper has only begun to tackle the problems of the macro-micro and micro-macro transitions. Theoretical explanations that include propositions on how macro-factors affect individual incentives and how individual protests are coordinated were suggested in the work on the East German revolution (see previous references) and on the rise and decline of the environmental movement (Opp 1996a). In the work on the East German revolution, several propositions about effects of macro-factors such as the liberalization in Poland and Hungary were tested by surveys. For example, we assumed that these liberalization processes increased the extent to which East German citizens thought that their protest could now make a difference because the East German regime could no longer oppose to give way to reforms if the spectacular changes in other socialist 'brother' states are buttressed by internal protests. We asked respondents what they thought considering the liberalization processes in Hungary, Poland and other countries of the eastern block. One of the items presented was: "I thought that I could personally make a difference when I participate now in demonstrations and similar activities." In the first wave of the surveys in Leipzig in 1990 47% of the 1300 respondents endorsed this statement. Ascertaining macro-micro relations by surveys is only one way to ascertain how macro-changes affect individual incentives. Another way is to provide propositions which specify under what conditions macro-changes affect the individual incentives to participate. In regard to possible coordination processes the work on the GDR revolution suggests some propositions as well.

7. Explaining Collective Political Action Over Time

It seems that the research program described so far is rather simple: it singles out certain independent variables, based on RCT and other theoretical perspectives, and tests their effects on a dependent variable. This holds in particular for relation 1 in Figure 1. There can be no doubt that this is an important and by no means trivial endeavor. There is a long list of variables that are supposed to affect political protest (see, e.g., Lofland 1996, ch. 8). It is thus important to ascertain what the factors are that are the most important determinants of individual political protest. For the present research program it is further important whether the factors are based on predictions from RCT or from other theories. There is a third reason why this is important: when we want to construct micro-macro models we have to know how macro-variables change the incentives of individual actors, as we have seen in the previous section. Thus, we need a good theory that specifies the individual incentives to protest when we want to explain macro-relations.

Knowing which individual incentives cause protest is further important for developing and testing *dynamic models of political action.* For example, assume it is to be explained why the number of participants increased in successive demonstrations in a former communist country in 1989. Assume that the government makes some small concession to the protesters after the first demonstration. This increases perceived personal influence of the participants and of some part of the general population: more people than before think that participating in a new demonstration would contribute to precipitate more concessions. This general increase of perceived influence prompts a part of the previously inactive population to participate so that the next demonstration becomes larger. This time the government remains unimpressed and increases repression by letting police forces injure several participants of the demonstration. This increases moral indignation which, in turn, increases informal social rewards to continue protesting. These positive incentives are so strong that the number of participants increases again in the next demonstration. This example explains a *sequence of protests.* In doing so it first describes a sequence of macro-events: concessions and repression of the government. It is argued that these changes on the macro-level increased the protest incentives of the population. This example illustrates that it is of utmost importance for the formulation of dynamic models to know what kinds of incentives are the decisive determinants of protest behavior.

A major goal of the research program is to formulate such dynamic models, i.e. to explain political protest over time. So far we provided only two examples that explain changing protests over time: one is the change of the protests in the GDR in the fall of 1989, the other focuses on the explanation of the rise and decline of the environmental movement in Germany – see the previous references. The major goal of developing dynamic models and test them is thus underdeveloped.

8. Explaining the Independent Variables of the Theory of Collective Action

The last major goal of the research program is also concerned with dynamic explanations of political action. The explanation of the East German protests in 1989 alluded to in the previous section assumed that certain macro-changes led to a change of the individual incentives. Such propositions thus endogenize rational choice variables. In other words, preferences (i.e. discontent), perceived influence, moral and social incentives are no longer considered as given, but are themselves variables that are to be explained. In macro-micro theories that were the focus of the previous section the major independent variables are macro-factors, the dependent variables incentives. Such a theory is incomplete because the incentive variables themselves are *interdependent* (see Opp 1998c) – this is symbolized by the curved arrow 5 in Figure 1. For example, assume that there is high political discontent. A protest norm claims that protest is a duty under certain conditions (Jasso/Opp 1997). One of those conditions is high political discontent. Thus, if discontent increases then the perceived moral obligation to protest increases as well. In this example, discontent has a positive effect on moral incentives.

Furthermore, there is a reciprocal relation between protest and the incentives (see particularly Finkel/Muller 1998), as arrow 6 of Figure 1 indicates. For example, we found that past protest behavior has strong effects on protest norms as well as on perceived influence. As this example indicates, we apply a Rational Choice approach not only to explain action but to explain cognitive beliefs and norms as well. In regard to beliefs, for example, we start from the assumption that acquiring and holding beliefs depends on the costs and benefits an individual incurs when she or he acquires or holds a belief. We provided various propositions that follow from this basic assumption and tested them by survey data. Current work on the research program focuses on the formulation of models in which the interdependence of the incentives is explored and in which hypotheses about such effects are tested with panel data.[14]

9. Summary of the Research Program

This paper has outlined a research program whose goal is to explain protest behavior and its causes. The program sets out to attain this goal by applying a wide version of RCT including all kinds of incentives and taking account of limited rationality. This includes, among other things, misperception of reality. A second aim of the program is to test the predictions derived from this theory in natural situations by applying survey research. Due to the problematic nature of

[14] Steven E. Finkel and I are presently working on a book – the preliminary title is *The Dynamics of Collective Political Action* – that focuses on the interdependence of the incentives. In this book we use two panel studies to test our propositions: The West German data from the international project panel (see footnote *) and waves 2 and 3 from the GDR project (see also footnote *). See further Opp 2001a on explaining perceived political influence. On the explanation of protest norms see Opp 2001c.

any theory in the social sciences a third concern of the research program is comparative empirical theory testing, i.e. comparing the extent to which predictions from RCT and predictions from other theories are empirically confirmed. One central objective of advocates of RCT is to explain macro-propositions (such as a positive relationship of inequality and political violence) by showing what processes macro-changes elicit on the individual level that, in turn, lead to protest events such as demonstrations on the macro-level. This is the fourth goal of the research program. Its final part is the formulation and test of dynamic models. In these models propositions are needed that explain what changes of macro-factors have what kind of impact on the individual incentives to protest. This means that the independent variables of RCT are no longer considered to be given but become dependent variables themselves. For example, we try to explain why people overestimate their influence or how protest norms emerge. In macro-micro propositions (see arrow 2 of Figure 1) only macro-factors are regarded as the causes for changing incentives. However, the incentives are interdependent (see arrow 5 of Figure 1). For example, strong discontent gives rise to protest norms. Moreover, there are reciprocal relations between protest and incentives. This, then, is another focus of the research program: explaining the independent variables of the theory of collective action.

10. What Has to Be Done

I have concentrated in this article on work I have been involved in. As far as I can see no other scholar has systematically pursued a similar research program on political participation over such a long time. There are, however, many scholars who try to test propositions about political participation, and especially protest behavior, based on a wide version of a rational choice theory, by survey research.[15] The work of James L. Gibson is particularly important (see, e.g., Gibson 1997 with further references). Other scholars are also interested in developing a theory of collective political action by applying a wide version of RCT, but they are not involved in survey research.[16] There is further theory and research on other questions of the research program that is scattered in the literature, but I will not review this work. Instead, I will outline some problems that are particularly important and that should be addressed in future research.

Although there is ample research to test incentive models that examine the impact of incentives to protest on protest behavior there are some 'anomalies' (see, e.g., Gibson 1997). For example, in some empirical studies we find a strong effect of informal critical networks on protest behavior; in other studies these effects do not obtain. Furthermore, the plausible interaction effect of discontent and perceived influence is often smaller than expected. How can these inconsistencies be explained? One possible explanation is that random measurement

[15] For reviews see Leighley 1995; Whitely 1995.

[16] See, e.g., the contributions of a special issue of *Rationality and Society*, edited by Jack Goldstone and me (vol. 6, no. 1, 1994). The work of Timur Kuran (e.g. 1995) and Mark Lichbach (see, e.g., 1995; 1996) are examples.

errors which are typical for survey research weaken correlations so that some effects that actually exist are not found in the data. It is indeed plausible that especially in general population surveys many people have never thought about their personal influence or about protest norms and just choose some answer categories at random. Although careful pretests were conducted for every survey further research is urgently needed that focuses on exploring what people think when they answer our survey questions and to what extent the questions are answered in a reliable way. Another explanation is that the theory is deficient. For example, 'perceived influence' is measured as the likelihood that a person can make a difference when she or he participates in a given action such as a demonstration. It should be examined whether perceived influence in regard to the kind of public good that protesters want to be provided is important for protest participation. For example, the perceived influence of a person performing a given action might not only depend on performing that action but also on the kind of public good whose provision is at issue. For example, participating in a demonstration against unemployment might be regarded as less efficacious than participating in a demonstration against the construction of a highway.

There is a dearth of work addressing comparative empirical theory testing. An important task is to reconstruct assumptions of approaches that are explicitly challenging RCT such as 'constructivism' using ideas of framing and identity (see footnote 12). A first step must be to generate some testable propositions from these approaches and compare them with Rational Choice propositions. So far such attempts are largely missing.

Another deficiency of existing theory and research is an explicit modeling of macro-micro models. By this we are referring to relations 2 and 3 of Figure 1. There are many possibilities of macro-micro transitions (see Opp 1992) that theory and research could further explore and incorporate in dynamic models – whose proliferation is an ingredient of the research program that is underdeveloped. In formulating those models it is important to include hypotheses that endogenize incentives, i.e. that treat the incentives as dependent variables. RCT is often criticized for not being engaged in focusing on such theories. Although an increasing number of scholars is concerned with this work by now the general critique is still valid. The field of social movements and protest provides an opportunity to develop explanations of preferences and beliefs by looking at a substantive explanatory problem.

This article focuses on explaining protest. I submit that a similar research program could be pursued for other fields of research as well. For example, in explanations of criminal behavior a group of scholars applies already a wide model of RCT and uses survey research to test predictions from such a model (see, e.g., Clarke/Felson 1993, Cornish/Clarke 1986). In this work, some of the kinds of incentives that are relevant for protest behavior are relevant for crime as well: moral and social incentives. Furthermore, the problem of explaining macro-relations (such as between changes of the criminal law and the crime rate) by micro-processes obtains in the field of crime as well. It thus seems that the research program this paper focuses on can be applied to other fields of research as well. It would be worthwhile to explore this possibility more systematically.

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