

Mobilizing the Single-Case Study: Doug McAdam's *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970*

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We apply a set of rules for theorizing developed to expand the “rigorous” methodology of quantitative research to Doug McAdam’s Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970 (1982). We contend that the strength and breadth of McAdam’s data and his application of that data to refute extant theories combined with his new flexible—perhaps overly so—concepts allowed political process theory (PPT) to rise to prominence in the field. We find his book to be a good example of how a single-case study, despite its shortcomings, can play a crucial role in the development of theory and the emergence of influential research paradigms.

KEY WORDS: social movements; case study; political process theory.

INTRODUCTION

In this article, we apply a set of rules for theorizing developed to expand the “rigorous” methodology of quantitative research to more qualitative work, in this case, Doug McAdam’s *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970* (1982). This is a crucial book in the development of the sociology of social movements—the theory it advances, political process theory (PPT), has come to be viewed as “hegemonic” in the field (Goodwin and Jasper 1999), and the book remains a staple of undergraduate syllabi. The success of PPT is somewhat surprising, given that McAdam developed it from a single case study, the Civil Rights Movement. How is it that a theoretical model developed from a case study, which itself was chosen on the dependent variable, can become

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extremely influential in the field? Our central concern here is to address this paradox.

We frame our analysis of McAdam's work in terms of the canons of qualitative methods, the most important recent articulation of which appears in *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (King et al. 1994). The central weaknesses in McAdam's book can be related to areas where McAdam diverged from King, Keohane and Verba's criteria. Single-case studies are not held to be the best means to develop or adjudicate among generalizable theories (Amenta 1991). Yet, we find his book to be a good example of how a single-case study, despite its shortcomings, can play a crucial role in the development of theory and the emergence of influential research paradigms. We contend that the strength and breadth of McAdam's data and his application of that data to refute extant theories, combined with his new flexible—perhaps overly so—concepts, allowed PPT to rise to prominence in the field.

MCADAM'S PROJECT

In *Political Process*, McAdam seeks to enter into dialogue with the two major streams of thought on social movements at the time of his writing: the classical and resource mobilization perspectives. McAdam sees both as deficient in their approach to social movements. Thus, he develops an alternative to these perspectives in the form of the political process model, which has two central tenets: social movements are political rather than psychological phenomena; and social movements represent a continuous process from development to decline (1982, p. 36). Somewhat in keeping with the resource mobilization perspective, the political process model holds that relatively few elites control the wealth of power in the political sphere. In contrast to the resource mobilization theorists, however, McAdam suggests, as Marxists long have, that excluded groups do have the capacity to bring about structural change. Building on these assumptions, McAdam explicates the three key sets of elements of the political process model: the structure of political opportunities (*ibid.*, p. 40), indigenous organizational strength (p. 43), and cognitive liberation (p. 48).

Political opportunities refer to “any event or broad social process that serves to undermine the calculations and assumptions on which the political establishment is structured” (p. 41, emphasis in original). Examples given of such occasions are “wars, industrialization, international political realignments, prolonged unemployment, and widespread demographic changes” (*ibid.*). The key point is that relatively long-term social processes yield shifts in the political status quo, which are in effect changes in the opportunity structure. But the effect of such changes does not inevitably lead to the emergence of social movements. The “social processes . . . promote insurgency only indirectly through a restructuring of existing power relations” (*ibid.*). Moreover, the shifting power relations “can

facilitate increased political activism on the part of excluded groups either by seriously undermining the stability of the entire political system or by increasing the political leverage of a single insurgent group” (p. 42). Thus, the opportunities, as McAdam describes them, can have diverse implications for different excluded groups. Yet, political opportunities represent just that. They do not guarantee that mobilization will occur among excluded groups. Thus McAdam turns to the next facet of the political process model: indigenous organizational strength.

Indigenous organizational strength refers to the resources of the aggrieved population that allow them to exploit the opportunities afforded them by the changes in the political opportunity structure. Without these resources, it would be difficult for a social movement to uphold a sustained effort. Factors that enhance the indigenous organizational strength within the minority population are the existence of indigenous group organizations, both formal and informal (e.g., churches, clubs); an established structure of solidary incentives, which refers to “the myriad interpersonal rewards that provide the motive force for participation” (p. 45); a well-developed communication network; and leaders or organizers. All of these factors serve as resources, from *within* the excluded group, for the development (and, presumably, success) of social movements.

The final factor in the political process model is cognitive liberation. Political opportunities and indigenous organizational strength yield only the structural potential for mobilization. What is needed beyond this is the recognition by the excluded group that their status is not inevitable, that their status as a group has its origins in the political system, and that their status can be changed (p. 51).

The confluence of these three factors—expanding political opportunities, indigenous organizational strength, and cognitive liberation—constitutes the political process perspective, which serves as a viable alternative to the classical and resource mobilization models. Indeed, unlike the alternatives, political process attempts to account for both internal and external factors that influence social movement emergence and longevity.

MCADAM’S EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

Armed with the three alternative perspectives, McAdam undertakes an empirical analysis of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. In so doing, he focuses on four historical periods he considers relevant to the movement. The general periodization he employs includes the long-term historical background leading up to black insurgency (1876–1954), the development of black insurgency (1955–1960), the “heyday” of black insurgency (1961–1965), and the decline of black insurgency (1966–1970). Throughout the treatment of each of these periods, McAdam is mindful of the three alternative models available to him, and he is careful to incorporate a discussion of how well each accounts for the empirical data. What emerges from his analysis of the data is an account of insurgency that highlights the

importance of changes in political opportunity structures, organizational strength, and the degree of cognitive liberation across the relevant historical periods. Thus, McAdam concludes that among the three models, political process best accounts for the factors leading up to and surrounding the development, prominence, and decline of the Civil Rights Movement.

In order for McAdam to support his claims, he uses a wide array of data, including governmental and organizational data sources as well as data from the *New York Times Index*. While all data sources are open to critical interrogation, McAdam is aware that the utilization of the *Times Index* marks a specific point of vulnerability. In a brief treatment of this issue in an appendix (pp. 235–237), he justifies the use of the *Times Index* by citing three strengths of the technique: it allows for replication by future authors as well as the systematic development and testing of hypotheses; when carefully employed, it captures, albeit crudely, the macro-level processes relevant to insurgency; and it stands as an exception to the relative dearth of information on insurgency. McAdam's discussion of this issue suggests that he is aware of the limitations of his data, and we find that he uses the data prudently throughout his analysis. What is perhaps most compelling is not his use of any one data source, but the combination of data sources that come together in his work.

THE CANONS OF QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

King, Keohane and Verba envision a uniform set of principles guiding the development, testing, and adjudication of social science theorizing that applies as equally to large-scale survey work as it does to single-case studies.² They “seek not dogma, but disciplined thought” (1994, p. 7). With their stated goals of improving research questions, theory, data quality, and use of existing data, King et al. detail rules for developing descriptive and causal inferences, constructing research design, and avoiding common errors and biases. As even the authors would agree, many of the suggestions they put forward are neither new nor unique; rather, they constitute what they consider the “underlying logic of inference” behind quantitative and qualitative work that makes it both “systematic and scientific” (ibid., pp. 4–5). That is, all social science research shares the common characteristics of having public procedures, uncertain conclusions, and the goal of inference and placing methodology at the center of any inquiry.

While detailing all of their guidelines is beyond the scope of this article,³ we would like to highlight a number of their rules, particularly those that are critical to our examination of McAdam's *Political Process*. King et al. follow Arthur

²As their primary experience and audience is political scientists, King et al. make little mention of ethnographies, although they undoubtedly would claim that many, if not all, of the same rules apply, particularly in regards to sample selection.

³For a systematic explication of King et al.'s guidelines, see Munck (1998).

L. Stinchcombe (1968, p. 22), who, three decades ago, wrote, “[T]he basic logical process of science is the elimination of alternative theories . . .” McAdam would likely consider Stinchcombe’s statement relevant but beyond the scope of his work. McAdam writes:

It should be noted that this exercise in no way amounts to a rigorous “test” of these three models. Given the complexity of the processes under examination and the broad time frame adopted in this study, even a rough approximation to the experimental model of scientific inquiry is impossible. (1982, p. 4)

While McAdam cautions readers of his work along these lines, we contend that the manner in which he carries out his analysis is consistent with Stinchcombe’s assertion. Indeed, McAdam frames his discussion in terms of the three models, concluding that the political process perspective offers the best fit of the three alternatives to the data on the Civil Rights Movement. Given the complexity of the issues at hand, it is not surprising that McAdam cautions readers. Yet accounting for national social movement processes is always both immense and complex. Thus, working within the questions McAdam has framed for himself, it is hard to imagine that he could have been any more loyal to the logic of eliminating alternative explanations.

Another tenet of theory-building is that theorists construct internally consistent theories that have many observable implications (King et al. 1994; Stinchcombe 1968). This relates to another tenet of “scientific” inquiry: data and analyses should be replicable (King et al. 1994). Bracketing the limitations of some of McAdam’s concepts,⁴ which we address below, the political process model is internally consistent and does allow its proponents to make statements that could be replicated. For example, one could take the data McAdam himself has used to replicate (or refute) his findings.

One point of potential criticism that could be brought against McAdam is his use of only one case in his analysis. McAdam is aware of this issue: “I am simply presenting evidence that I think allows for a comparative judgement of the empirical merits of these three models *as regards the single example of insurgency analyzed here*” (p. 4, emphasis added). Indeed, by focusing only on one case, he limits the power of his argument. At least two issues are relevant here—generalizability and variation. Single-case studies are best at explaining the nuances of social phenomena and addressing specific mechanisms that produce, reproduce, change, or are otherwise related to the phenomena. However, little can be taken from these studies that is broadly applicable. Is it possible that theory developed from a single case can teach us about anything beyond that case?

The answer to this is that studies do not stand on their own. Instead, each scholar is part of a scientific community and each study is part of a body of

⁴The key issue here is the relationship(s) between the variables. We recognize that the underspecification of concepts, such as “political opportunities,” undermines the possibility for replicating theoretical assertions.

knowledge (Laitin 1995, p. 456). Conducting a case study does not preclude others from applying a theoretical model to other cases. In a similar vein, King et al. (1994, p. 10) suggest that rather than considering cases as unique historical events, social scientists should “[conceptualize] each case as a member of a *class of events* about which meaningful generalizations can be made.” Thus, McAdam is offering his theory as an explanation of the Civil Rights Movement and inviting other scholars to test its applicability across a range of social movements. The single case is not so much a definitive proof, but an opportunity to explicate PPT.

Yet, the problem of variation on the dependent variable remains. It is impossible to argue that a certain phenomenon affects another when the latter is constant. In small-N samples, researchers should therefore pick their cases with care, making sure to provide as much variation as possible. Alternatively, researchers can shift their unit of analysis in order to create more cases with more variation. For example, one could create more cases by examining countries over time or by examining subnational units.

While he has only one case, we contend that McAdam circumvents this problem somewhat by looking longitudinally at the factors that comprise the political process model. This affords him multiple observations (King et al. 1994) of both the independent and dependent variables. While he does attempt to do too much with this (see our discussion of the problem of having too many independent variables), his method is certainly preferable to just looking at the period of insurgency.

By including the periods before and after the peak years of black mobilization, McAdam, as he notes, sidesteps the potential trap of examining a phenomenon only when it is occurring without examining the preceding and succeeding periods to see what is unique about the period. Instead of examining the period 1954–1964, he looks at the broader historical trends occurring between 1876 and 1970. This allows him to divide what could be one case (mobilization) into three (pre-mobilization, mobilization, and post-mobilization).

With only three cases, however, he can only make causal arguments about two independent variables at most without running into problems with degrees of freedom. By arguing that neither political opportunities nor indigenous networks (the variables he argues contained the most explanatory power) were present in both pre- and post-mobilization periods, while both were present during, McAdam becomes incapable of distinguishing between the effects of each. Since he presents no cases where opportunities were present without organization (or the reverse), we cannot say that both are required. It could simply be that opportunities (or organizations) themselves are sufficient to induce mobilization, and that his discussion of the other is simply misguided.

Skocpol (1979) implements a solution to this problem by bringing in additional cases which she uses only as counterfactual examples. They are not the main focus of her research, but rather briefly discussed cases in which the variables took on different values. While this solution is useful, it involves bringing in

other cases, which is not always necessary or possible. Another potential solution that is available without gathering much additional data would be simply to shift McAdam's level of analysis to individual states. In states with stronger organizations and greater opportunities one could expect mobilizations earlier and with more intensity than in states with weaker organizations and lesser opportunities. While factors that are national in character, like Supreme Court decisions, cannot be modeled in this fashion, most of the conditions that McAdam discusses can be broken down by state (NAACP chapters, enrollment in black colleges, and median income). Without these extra cases, McAdam cannot make the causal explanation he would like.

Building upon Popper (1968), King et al. contend that causal theories have to be falsifiable. "One question should be asked about any theory . . . simply: what evidence would falsify it" (1994, p. 100). Theories have to be constructed in a way such that specific hypotheses can be disproved based on the researcher's observations. A theory should have certain implications, like an urban revolt happening under specific circumstances. If those conditions exist and the riot happens, this provides support for the theory, but if it does not happen, then the theory is wrong, and needs to be reformulated or abandoned.

Closely related to this is their desire to "maximize concreteness." Abstract concepts should be "defined in a way such that they, or at least their implications, can be observed and measured" (ibid., p. 109). A vague or abstract concept is often easy to find supporting evidence for, but much harder to disprove. They note approvingly of Merton's critique that Parson's theory of social action was based on the futility of such broad conceptualization that it could not be falsified (ibid.). This is not, however, an abandonment of the idea of generalization. They endorse theories that try to explain "*as much as possible with as little as possible*" (p. 29, emphasis in original). This can be accomplished by testing as many varied theoretical implications as possible, rather than testing one implication in similar circumstances (see also Stinchcombe 1968, pp. 18–28).

King et al. also favor theories that are internally consistent (p. 105). If one part of a theory predicts that under certain conditions urban revolts will occur, and another part of the theory hypothesizes that under those same conditions urban peace will prevail, the theory needs to be reformulated, but it cannot be tested. No matter what occurs, the theory is both false and true.

In his work, McAdam uses a number of social scientific terms whose definitions are either inchoate or contested. This is where careful definitions are required so as to avoid confusion for the reader. This is a problem with a number of the concepts McAdam uses, most particularly with "political opportunity."

McAdam does not clearly define "political opportunity" anywhere in the text. The general idea is that "opportunities for a challenger to engage in successful collective action do vary greatly over time" (1982, p. 40). While this could be useful, McAdam's use of the term "successful" is somewhat misleading in the

context. Is he referring to success in Gamson's (1975) sense of either gaining new advantages or being recognized as a member of polity? This is possible, as just a few lines above he mentions the ability to "advance group interests" (1982, p. 40). That section of the book is entitled "The Generation of Insurgency," however, and discussion of gaining new advantages or recognition from the state is generally lacking from the rest of the book. It seems, then, that "successful" refers instead to the very act of being able to mobilize; in this view, there can be no "unsuccessful" collective action.

So we are left with the idea that contexts matter; during some periods we are more likely to find insurgent groups than in others. Under what conditions do these periods arise? They are the result of either "generalized political instability" or "broad social processes" (*ibid.*, p. 42). The former occurs during periods of national crises (he gives the example of the post-Civil War South), while the latter refers to situations where an oppressed group's situation improves without undermining the national authority (the situation found in his own study). These conditions "reduc[e] the power discrepancy between insurgent groups and their opponents" and "raise significantly the costs of repressing insurgent action" (p. 43). The classic example of the latter, however, is the national outrage at Bull Connor's tactics in Birmingham. The brutality of the police created a backlash that engendered public support for the protesters, forcing the federal government to act (p. 174). This, however, leads us back to the question of whether we are attempting to explain movement origins, maintenance, or outcomes. While negative public reaction to state sponsored violence may explain outcomes, McAdam provides little support that it sparked the insurgency.

The specific mechanisms that McAdam includes under opportunity all seem compelling: increases in urbanization, attendance at black colleges, Southern membership in the NAACP, African-American median incomes, and favorable Supreme Court decisions, combined with decreases in lynching and the importance of cotton in the Southern economy. McAdam presents evidence that many of these may have played central roles in the rise of the Civil Rights Movement. In explaining the decline of the Movement, he points to receding support in public opinion polls for civil rights as an example of declining political opportunity. While this might also be true, it is hard for one concept to carry the burden of encompassing everything from GDP numbers to Gallup figures.

The central problem with this term is that it becomes very difficult to operationalize in a consistent manner. As King et al. warn, concepts that lack concreteness become difficult to falsify, and thus disprove. If political opportunity can be interpreted to mean different things in each context, it becomes nearly impossible to come up with counterexamples that would disprove the theory. Whenever a movement arises, there is bound to be something that can be interpreted as a political opportunity, and when it dies out, there is bound to be something else that can be interpreted as the lack of political opportunity, especially when the two factors do not necessarily have to be opposites or even related (Amenta, forthcoming).

This can be contrasted with McAdam’s development of the idea of indigenous organizational strength. Here, he lists a number of specific factors that can be easily operationalized: membership, incentive structures, communication networks, and leadership. Each exists along a scale, with their relative preponderance considered positive and their absence negative. Not only can they be consistently applied throughout his model, but they can also be used in studying other social movements.

This is not the first place difficulties with the concept of political opportunity have been discussed. In a later work, McAdam (1996) expresses the varied and sometimes contradictory meanings that have been applied to the term since he first developed it in *Political Process*. While he does not directly relate this to the ambiguities found in his original work, its roots here are fairly well exposed. Other adherents to the model have also commented on the multiplicity of forms it tends to take (Tarrow 1996; Meyer 1999). Critics less friendly to the concept have raised more probing questions. Amenta (forthcoming) presents arguments similar to ours, referring to the theory of political opportunities as “essentially ambiguous” and “conceptually underdeveloped.” Goodwin and Jasper (1999, p. 28) offer a more scathing critique, calling many uses of the term “tautological, trivial, inadequate or just plain wrong.”

King et al. also point out that “dependent variables should be dependent” (1994, p. 106). What the social scientist is trying to explain should not have a biased influence on the independent variables. While they give advanced methods for controlling for this, the recommended course of action is to simply choose “explanatory variables that are clearly exogenous.” Causal feedback loops are some of the more difficult elements to model in the quantitative world, and no less so doing qualitative work. King et al. suggest avoiding them whenever possible because of the difficulties in proving causal directionality. Unfortunately, they may accurately map the social world and are necessary for social scientists. McAdam states that social movements constitute one such case, as is represented in his development of the political process model (McAdam 1982:51), which is reproduced here as Figure 1.

In this model of social movement emergence, broad socioeconomic processes influence both political opportunities and indigenous organizational strength. Both of these influence cognitive liberation, and all three affect likelihood of social

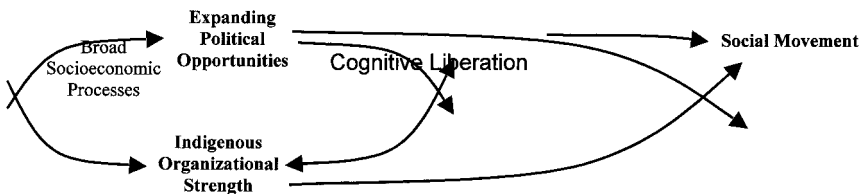


Fig. 1. The Political Process Model.

movement emergence. Additionally, however, cognitive liberation influences indigenous organizational strength. Proving this final link would be complicated even in an entirely mathematical model, and McAdam's trouble in providing support for this relationship is apparent. In fact, though he presents evidence for all the other links, he does not even attempt to support this part of the model with historical or even anecdotal evidence.

Elsewhere, he might want to think more closely about which exactly is the dependent variable. Though he argues that political opportunities influence social movements, one could contend that the existence and efforts of a social movement—the dependent variable in this case—could in fact be considered an independent variable that influences the political opportunities in a given context (Tarrow 1998). Thus, the expanding political opportunities variable is not exogenous. While this could be considered quite problematic, at times it is unavoidable. King et al. (1994, p. 198) recognize this issue:

[E]ndogeneity is not always a problem to be fixed but is often an integral part of the process by which the world produces our observations. Ascertaining the process by which values of the explanatory variables were determined is generally very hard and we cannot usually appeal to any automatic procedure to solve problems related to it.

Thus, the endogeneity problem appears to be endemic to the relationship between political opportunities and the emergence of social movements. This does not mean that there is nothing researchers can do about it. They should be able to point to conditions in which social movements exercise influence on political opportunities. This relationship occasionally comes to the fore in the text of his historical account, but unfortunately never in his theoretical account.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have given McAdam a mixed review methodologically. While he attempts to abide by the methodological canon, he falls short in a number of areas, showing weakness not only in his methodology but also in his theory. This has not stopped McAdam's PPT from assuming a central position in the American wing of the social movements literature. Here, we attempt three explanations for his influence.

First, he presents an overwhelming amount of evidence. He includes not only a compelling historical narrative, but also a systematically organized deluge of quantitative data, including statistics culled from the *New York Times Index*, membership data from various organizations, fiscal records, and polling data, as well as governmental statistics. Going back to Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro* ([1899] 1996), the use of quantitative data has proven an effective strategy to bolster the claims of case study research.

One of the most compelling applications of this data is his convincing refutation of alternative theoretical models. We suspect that by providing a systematic

critique of the classical and resource mobilization perspectives, McAdam successfully created an opportunity for his own theory. This is particularly important because the strengths of his theory address the weaknesses he finds in the alternative theories.

Finally, although based on a single case study, he develops a flexible theory that others have found to be useful in explaining a wide array of social movements. As critics and even McAdam have pointed out, PPT's concept of opportunities has been applied in many different ways across many different types of social movements. In this way, the concept and PPT are just like the lyrics of a popular song, the advice of a newspaper columnist, and many aphorisms; they are widely used not only because they can be applied to many kinds of *situations* but also because their *meanings* differ in different situations. While this is technically a problem for PPT and knowledge gained from it, many researchers have found the concept, in whichever manner they apply it, useful as an explanatory variable.

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