

What to do Next? How Social Movements Create Change: A Three-Dimensional Case Study

**Miguel Alvelo-Rivera,
Northland College, Sociology**

Dr. Kent Redding
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Department of Sociology

ABSTRACT

Social movements are agents of change in society. Scholars have generally agreed that social movements can be defined as a collective, organized, sustained, non-institutionalized challenge to power holders, belief-systems, practices, and/or authorities (Goodwin and Jasper 2003). However, there is an ongoing debate regarding what determines movement success. Some researchers view success largely the result of a movement's ability to gather the necessary resources (money, supporters, activists, etc.) to generate the pressure needed to achieve their goals. Others argue that movement success is traceable primarily to the political opportunities that arise in the course of a movement's development. Still, others assert that what truly determines a movement's capacity to achieve its goals is its ability to use tactical innovation to outmaneuver its opponents even when opportunities and resources are scarce. This study seeks to further the understanding of movement success theory with a case study that examines the interrelations between the factors of these three theories of movement outcomes as they are expressed in the Puerto Rican environmental movement's struggle to preserve the Northeastern Ecological Corridor. This is a proposal for a three-dimensional historical analysis of movement resources, political opportunities, and tactics to assess the level of interaction between these categories.

Introduction

What do the civil rights, nuclear freeze, environmental, anti-abortion, and conservative movements have in common with the Puerto Rican environmental movement? They have all aspired to change something about our society. In essence, they are all collective, organized, sustained, non-institutionalized challenges to power holders, belief-systems, practices, and/or authorities (Goodwin and Jasper 2003). Scholars have attempted, for several decades, to explain why these movements exist and whether and how they create change. There is an ongoing debate concerned with the definition of movement "success" and "failure." Three leading theoretical paradigms that examine movement outcomes have been at the epicenter of this academic debate. Political opportunities theory, resource mobilization theory, and tactical innovation theory have all examined the aforementioned social movements and attempted to explain the outcomes of their actions (be they successful or not) through a variety of lenses that examine everything from structural conditions to individual actions that affect and determine the nature of these outcomes.

Political opportunities theory examines movement development and outcomes with an analysis of the interactions a movement has with power-holders such as the government. It argues that what determines movement "success" or "failure" is the amount of and type of response movements receive from the groups that they are challenging. However, political opportunities theory fails to examine other factors that play into these power-holders' decision-making process. Resource mobilization theorists argue that political opportunities are often bounded by a movement's capacity to gather enough of the right resources (money, activists, time, leaders, etc.) with which to put pressure on power-holders. They contend that the more resources a movement can gather, the more power it has to influence the power-holders. However, tactical innovation theorists argue with resource mobilization theory and assert that what really matters is a movement's capacity to be aware of the socio-political environment and adapt and

develop action tactics that, if used properly, will pressure power-holders into changing. To tactical innovation theorists, a small movement organization can have just as much a chance of success as a large movement organization if they know how to use tactics properly and adapt to the reactions from power-holders to these tactics.

Previous studies play these theories against each other and usually do not examine the interactions between them and how they affect each other sequentially across time. Some studies, such as McVeigh, Welch and Bjarnason (2003) have examined how some of these paradigms interact in different moments in time, however, they miss examining the sequentially of these interactions. The proposal for this study is to expand on this previous research and explore the interaction between these paradigms as they are expressed sequentially across time. Political opportunities theory, resource mobilization theory, and tactical innovation theory are all valid paradigms for social movement outcome. However, no single one of these paradigms seems to fully explain the variations in outcomes that occur between different social movements and through the passage of time in a single social movement. Such is the case of the North Eastern Ecological Corridor, which, when examined through time, cannot be fully explained by any single one of the three paradigms.

Nestled in the northeastern corner of the island of Puerto Rico are the last vestiges of pre-Columbian forested land. This area of 3,241 acres, also known as the Northeastern Ecological Corridor, has been highly coveted by several groups for decades. Members from the surrounding communities of Luquillo and Fajardo along with several national and international environmental organizations have been advocating for the protection of these lands from the fast-spreading urban sprawl that has quickly dominated the areas adjacent to the capital city. Developers and tourism industry advocates desire to construct hotels, condominiums, and golf resorts because of the well-known beauty of its beaches and its accessibility from the San Juan capital city. The government and government agencies have also been involved in this controversy since the beginning, on several occasions opening and closing doors for the development of the territory. This proposed research will examine the controversy over the Northeastern Ecological Corridor over the time period of 1996-2010. This time period was selected because of its abundance in examples of how political, organizational, tactical and overall social environmental conditions can change movement outcomes over time.

There are several indications in this case study that point to a dialogue between the political, resource, and tactical elements of this struggle through time. From 1996-1999 the movement to protect these lands was very small and had little presence in the surrounding communities. At this time, the government was controlled by a pro-development party that heavily supported projects such as the tourism complexes that were proposed for this area. Resource-less and with negative political opportunities, the movement to protect these lands still managed to get some attention from the government. Tactical innovations with protests and direct action gave the small-member organizations the power to convince the government to consider the area for preservation and declare a 110-acre nature reserve in 1999.

When government changed in 2000, so did the struggle. Although during this time period the party in power was a little more responsive and sympathetic to movement claims, the controversy was stalled for the four-year duration of the administration. Political opportunities were blocked off to the movement by the government's effective displays of disinterest in the area in general. During this time period, other national struggles, such as the de-militarization of the island of Vieques had taken center stage and had drawn all the attention from the national movement organizations.

In 2004, with a divided government in place where no single party had complete control of the different branches of the government, the movement to protect the Northeastern Ecological Corridor started picking up the pace. The communities surrounding the Corridor began to organize and membership grew. Political opportunities were also starting to grow since this new divided government gave the movement the power to play off the parties vying for greater control of government against each other. However, it wasn't until large-budget non-governmental organizations entered the scene in 2005

that the movement for the preservation of the Corridor started gaining momentum and helped create a favorable government reaction that accomplished an executive order declaring a nature reserve in the area in the year 2007. They accomplished this by mobilizing resources such as money, activists, media, and both the national and some international press, which is very much in tune with the resources mobilization theory for social movement change.

Although this executive order was perceived as a victory for the movement, this victory was short-lived. When the government changed again in 2008, a single-party dominant, pro-development government was elected. During this year, the movement for the protection of the Corridor had settled down and focused its energies in creating law proposals to make the governor's executive order a permanent law. Their efforts proved fruitless when in 2009 the current governor vetoed the executive order of 2007, and opened up the lands for another tourism complex proposal. It again seemed like political opportunities theory played a larger role in explaining the change.

However, looking beyond this specific moment when a political opportunity was taken away, we can examine the political opportunities of the previous government and ask ourselves: why were these laws not stronger and more permanent? The movement had an incredible amount of resources available to them (support from national and international organizations, hundreds of activists, money, committed leaders with time...), a divided government susceptible to movement claims, and they were using what seemed to be like appropriate tactical innovations for the task at hand. However, could it have been a lack of tactical innovation at this point that would help explain why these laws were not stronger? How do we understand causality? This moment in time may be explained monocrasually, however, we argue that we need to examine the conjunctural causes that lead to this outcome.

This proposal seeks to understand why the events surrounding this conflict occurred in their specific historical context. We expect to find a "dialectic of change" through time that is influenced by the interactions between political opportunities, resource mobilization, and tactical innovation. We will examine how the conjunction of these paradigms across time have affected movement outcomes.

Literature Review

Defining movement "success" is still a hotly contested discussion in social movement research. William A. Gamson (1990) argues that social movement success can be analyzed by looking at a set of outcomes. He identifies two main clusters under which these outcomes fall into: one deals with the fate of the groups that challenge the social movement and its organizations, while the other deals with the distribution of the new advantages that the group's beneficiaries gain from movement "failure" or "success" (Gamson 1990). In other words, as explained by McVeigh, Welch, and Bjarnason (2003) a movement succeeded if it "(1) gained acceptance and recognition from the state and/or (2) secured new advantages for [its] constituents" (p. 847). Meyer and Whittier (1994) add to Gamson's definition of success and argue that movements can also be considered successful, despite not gaining acceptance and recognition from the state or securing new advantages for its constituents. They argue that although a movement might not find success with its explicitly stated goals, its values, tactics, and constituents can "spill over" into other movements and find fulfill movement goals in the longer run. This alternative view on "success" is useful to us because it takes into account the impact that time and history have on movement outcomes and it implies that movement success might not be as simply identifiable as it may be perceived.

Regardless of whether our three leading theoretical paradigms consider movements as "successful," or "failed," the manner in which they explain movement outcomes is what is of true significance to us. As Giugni, McAdam, and Tilly (1999) explain, few have attempted to understand how movements matter, how they impact politics, social environments, social movements, and the participants themselves. Those who have studied outcomes (see Giugni, McAdam, Tilly, 1999; Meyer & Whittier 1994; Ganz 2004; McAdam 1983; McVeigh, Welch, Bjarnason 2003; McCammon et. al. 2008) tend to utilize one of the three theoretical frameworks to analyze social movement outcomes. Political opportunities, resource mobilization, and tactical innovation are the leading theoretical frameworks used

in the analysis of social movement outcomes. Each theory has its particular way of explaining what factors were key for the achievement of movement goals. They analyze movements from several perspectives that will be explained in further detail later on. They respectively examine the role of power-holders, organizations, and actions in determining outcomes.

Political opportunities theory focuses on an analysis of the systematic causes surrounding social movements. It argues, that the power-holders' reaction to a social movement will affect the development of the movement and the changes it can bring forth (Jenkins & Form 2005). The key players in determining social movement outcomes, in this case, are the elites. Because all present governments are controlled by exclusive groups of people, when we examine what key players matter in establishing laws, we realize that it is the elite's say that really matters. Under this context, social movements, which can sometimes be based on direct challenges from the people to the elites, are at the mercy of the reaction of the power-holders.

A political regime's crisis or expansion will bring with it several key players among the elites who will be responding to social movements' claims with acceptance or disapproval in its several forms. As Kingdon (1984: 173-4) explains:

Central to movement success are such factors as elite divisions, governmental control strategies (including excessive and erratic repression), support from political allies and short-term crises [...] that create "policy windows" for political advocacy.

Kingdon's (1984) definition helps us understand the significance of elite unity/division for social movements. Because elites rarely welcome change that is proposed by other groups of society when they are united in their goals, great opportunities arise when elite divisions and crises disrupt the status quo and make the power structure vulnerable to change. As Jenkins and Form (2005) further elucidate, the main assumption from Kingdon (1984) is that power-holders will oppose the inclusion of new groups into their political system, because they threaten the modus-operandi of the power structure and its benefiting members (Jenkins and Form 2005: 337).

Under political opportunities theory, social movements react to these "openings" and "closings" in policy from the government and proceed to push their goals in accordance with them. Most of the "openings" usually occur when strong elite divisions arise in the political arena. For example, in a democratic society, when opposing political parties vie for control over the political system, social movements can create allies inside each party and play them off of each other. We can see this in the time period between 2004-2008 in the Puerto Rican government. When different groups inside the elites sometimes stood back or behind the environmental movement in hopes that they will aid them in gaining power over the other political factions (Amenta 1992; McAdam 1982). As McVeigh, Welch, and Bjarnason (2003) explain, "movements are able to exert more influence on elected officials when the withdrawal of the movement's support can determine the outcome of electoral contests" (p. 848). As we shall see, this may help explain why most of the changes in policy regarding the Ecological Corridor seem to cluster around the pre and post-electoral years.

Political opportunities theory is a very valid paradigm with which to analyze movement outcomes because whether or not social movements intend to deal with elite groups, they *have to* deal with government reaction in one way or another. However, the downfall of political opportunities theory lies in its lack of an examination of the power that the movements themselves can exert--exempt from elite decisions. There are several instances in which governments have been "forced" to respond to movement claims, not because they have the potential to provide political parties with greater power in government, but because sometimes movements can grow big enough to pose a legitimate threat to the government itself. In this case, elites will respond to social movements in hopes of *maintaining* power. Resource mobilization theory can help us understand why sometimes those who are not in power can significantly challenge the power-holders themselves.

Resource mobilization examines the social movement organizations that participate within social movement “industries.” Viewing social movements as “industries” is an economic metaphor that helps them explain how the coalescence of “resources” works in determining movement power and achieving movement goals. Under a capitalist growth model, the movement industry and the movement organizations within that industry gather several resources. The organizations that are able to attain the greatest amount of resources are then more likely to exert the right amount of pressure on the government and achieve their goals.

Resource mobilization theory views a movement’s capacity to gather resources (money, activists, media and press attention, etc...) as the key factor in determining a movement’s strength to push forth the changes it aims to accomplish (Freeman 1979). Ganz (2000) argues that people and societal resources are central. The knowledge of the leaders and organizers and the access they have to social networks for potential allies and activists play a critical role in devising innovative strategies and tactics (Jenkins and Form 2005). From this point of view, regardless of the opportunities that are presented by the power-holders what matters is a movement’s capacity to acquire the necessary resources to pressure or aid the government to meet the movement’s goals.

However, under this context also, the group with the largest amount of resources is usually the government. Because of this, several scholars use resource mobilization in conjunction with political opportunities to explain how gathering greater resources can help sway political opportunities one way or the other. For example: the Sierra Club with its multi-million dollar budget and over 100,000 supporters has a greater capacity to sway the elites in its favor. It can lobby in congress and talk to and bargain with the elites about the movement goals. It can mobilize thousands of activists for protests; and it can head start private enterprises to achieve their goals through private means. In contrast, a small community organization that has less than 100 activists, has no money, and few connections in the government will undoubtedly have a harder time convincing the government.

Resource mobilization theory can help us understand the upswing in government reaction and the pace of reform in the 2004-2008 time period when the Sierra Club founded its Puerto Rico chapter and got involved with the Northeastern Ecological Corridor conflict—helping create an alliance of community, regional, national and international organizations that were able to get together activists, leaders, money, time, and experience to challenge the development proposals. However, the simple amalgamation of resources is not enough to convince a government of any movement’s cause, as is the case with other preservation organizations that have a lot of resources and money but operate more like a private business than a political challenger and can thus be ignored by government.

Smaller organizations can still achieve their goals, however, they use means that go beyond the gathering of resources and that provide them with a different kind of strength that can overcome the barriers that elites can put in front of them (see Ganz 2004). These small organizations can utilize a series of innovative tactics which combined with other social and cultural factors can make them appear stronger than what they really are—giving them sway power with the government. Tactical innovation theory focuses on studying this very phenomenon.

Tactical innovations theory examines the role that movement actions play in swaying elite decisions and movement outcome. It argues that what matters are the strategic adaptations that are made by a movement in reaction to the political opportunities the government presents them with and the resources they have available (McCammon et. al. 2008). The broader political and cultural environment, along with the movement resources are not the ultimate determining factor for movement success. Small organization that can creatively think up tactics that will disrupt the modus-operandi of the government and the power holders can have just as much swaying power as those that attempt to achieve their goals through legal and traditional means of action.

Tactical innovation theorists argue that resource mobilization theory focuses too much on accounting for the movement resources than the actions that the movement takes (McCammon et. al. 2008). Examples of this can be found with movement organizations such as the Fideicomiso de Conservación in Puerto Rico (a preservation organization) that have immense resources in activist base,

monetary funds, etc., yet do not affect policy as much as some scarier-resourced organizations, such as Amigos del MAR (radical environmentalist organization from Puerto Rico) have done. According to McCammon et. al. (2008), the tactical innovations put forth by movements are the key in determining the rate and speed of policy changes achieved by those who use strategic adaptation or fail to do so (p. 1106). This could help us explain both the early stages, but especially the later and current on-going process of the struggle to protect the lands of the Corridor. In the early stages of the process it helps to understand tactical innovation because it can explain how these small community groups received government attention. In the latter and current process of the struggle, it is more a lack of tactical innovation that hints at a potential understanding of why the executive order was so easily vetoed.

All these theories have definitive applicability to the case study when examined out of a historical context that ignores social, movement, and political changes through time. If we examine how these social, movement, and political changes through time interact with each other and affect social movements and movement organizations we can gain a better understanding of this “dialectic of change” that has been scantily examined by what seem to be one-dimensional, or at the most two-dimensional studies. Understanding these three theoretical lenses for social movement change will help us explain the current nature of the Northeastern Ecological Corridor conflict. However, only by analyzing the relations, or the “conversation” between these paradigms as they are expressed through time can we fully understand the outcomes of this struggle and the future directions it could take.

Methods and Data

An in-depth case study of the Northeastern Ecological Corridor conflict will be conducted with a historical data analysis of social and political events related to the issue. A collection of articles related to the ecological corridor and the efforts to either develop or preserve it will be gathered from all the national, regional, local, and organization newspapers published between the years of 1996-2010. Articles with the key words “Corredor Ecológico del Noreste” in the headline will be read in their entirety and content related to legal, governmental, or movement action will be collected. Articles focused exclusively on describing the natural value of the Corridor will be excluded from the study because they are not relevant to the historical analysis of the controversy. In addition to this, several structured interviews of activist leaders from movement organizations will be conducted to fully assess which tactics were employed at specific moments and why they were chosen over other potential tactics.

We will assess specifically if there is a relationship between the emergence of new tactics, greater resources, or political opportunities and how this affects outcomes. We will examine these variables across time and juxtapose them to quantify how they relate to each other. It will examine moments in time in which the conjunction of these theories has affected outcomes. Different from most studies examining relationships between variables, our study will have a qualitative focus. The reasoning behind this comes from a realization of time constraints for the study and because of the historical character of the data.

The focus of the study on this case is based on two factors: 1) the case’s unique and diverse history serves as a useful context under which to study the interactions between these paradigms, and 2) time limitations and funding make the focus on a case study more viable in contrast to a multiple-comparison of movements which would allow us to assess how these interactions work across social movements or differ between similar or contemporaneous situations.

Importance of Study

The researcher embarking on this study expects to contribute a deeper understanding of the realities of social change as it is affected by social movement outcomes. A multiple-dimensional study that examines the interactions between these sometimes opposing paradigms is necessary to understand the conjunctures that exist between political opportunities, movement resource mobilization, and tactical innovation as they affect movement outcomes. This study seeks to serve as a mediator in the debate over which paradigm “fits best” and expect to find a different reality with which it can be argued that no single social movement outcome paradigm can fully assess how social movements create change in society and

why their attempts at change can have varied reactions from power-holders, other movements, and society in general on a case to case basis. It is hoped that after this case study is completed, other social movements such as the civil rights movement, the environmental movement in all its expressions, the nuclear freeze, anti-abortion, and conservative movements can be re-examined and have their outcomes analyzed using this contextualization of change through time.

This study will also be adding to the almost non-existent literature on the Puerto Rican environmental movement by examining the progress of one of its current conflicts through time and its relation to the particular social and political environment of the island of Puerto Rico. It will serve, not only as a jumping board for further research of the unique environmental movement of the island, but also as a resource for non-scholars interested in better understanding how social movements create change. With this knowledge, these individuals and organization can assess what can be done next, taking into account the patterns that have been seen in the past.

Because the movement and conflict that are being studied are on-going, this gives us the potential for an on-going study of this process that can potentially integrate other more expansive methodology and research scope. This research has a lot of potential for further expansion, especially for a comparative study which would help us assess how these categories are also affected from movement to movement. This research project is then seen as a starting point for a larger project that aims to further our understanding of social movements and the processes of change in our society.

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