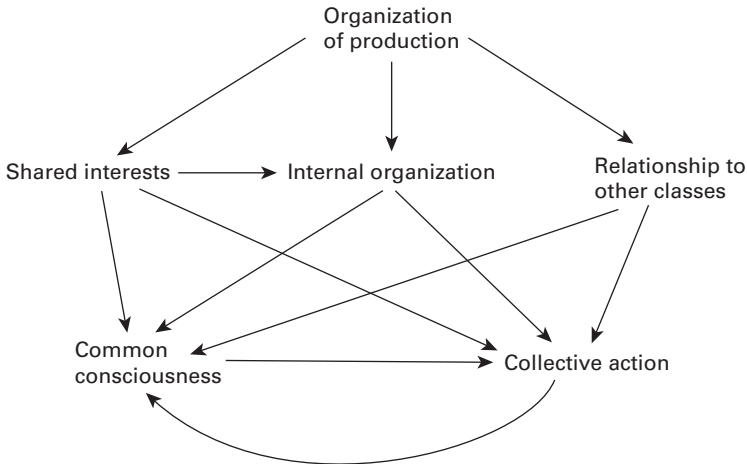


## 2 AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY

Scholarship on political communication draws—implicitly and explicitly—on the work of luminaries like Marshall McLuhan and Manuel Castells. But what if we instead started our inquiry with Karl Marx? To foreground my argument, I read Marx as a more nuanced observer of the interplay between structure and agency than he is sometimes given credit. Better specifying Marx’s recognition of the interplay between these factors highlights the places where agency-, culture-, and emotion-centered approaches to movements may have overcorrected, effectively championing individualistic voluntarism over (rather than *alongside*) structural factors and forces. Keeping a better eye on the dialectical nature of structure and agency—a process which necessarily recognizes the material—may help movement scholars to avoid technological determinism while also focusing attention on technology’s social role. The implications are not insignificant. We can ask ourselves what classic social movement theory would look like should it attend to technology, rather than to technology’s fruits.<sup>1</sup>

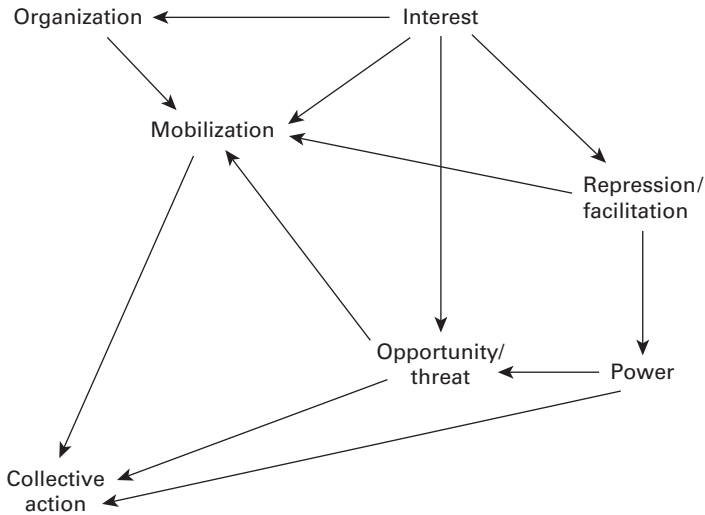
The first intersection between technology and movements lies at the macro level, as broad changes in science and technology

shape sociopolitical relationships and opportunities for contentious politics. This line of scholarship traces back to Marx, whose focus on changes in the means of production led to his theory of radical social transformation and political change. This approach was adapted by Charles Tilly in his influential 1978 book *From Mobilization to Revolution*. There Tilly drew on Marxian principles to illustrate the relationship between key movement factors—organization, repression/facilitation, and opportunity/threat—in explaining mobilization and collective action. From whence do these factors spring in Tilly’s argument? Not from Marx’s organization of production, but instead from a combination of power and interest. The important decision to replace the organization of production (figure 8.1) with interests (figure 8.2) underemphasizes the very real material factors that shape the contexts movements



**Figure 8.1**

Tilly’s simple Marxist model (“Organization of Production”). Source: Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978), 43.



**Figure 8.2**

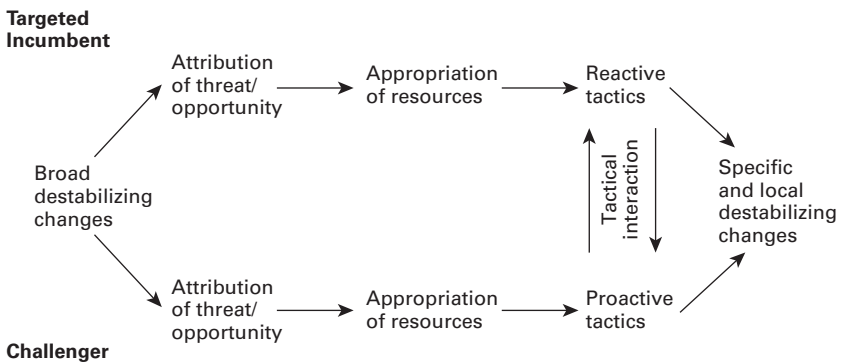
Tilly's simple political process model ("Interests"). Source: Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978), 56.

operate within. This has the effect of reducing consciousness to opportunities and threats (as Tilly would later frame it) and suggesting all paths lead to collective action. Absent is a sense of how interests are turned into action. Also missing is Marx's recognition that consciousness and action have a recursive relationship.<sup>2</sup>

When Doug McAdam set out to refine this approach, he reintroduced the causal importance of science and technology (in the collapse of King Cotton) while incorporating the Weberian emphasis on attribution and appropriation in a secondary role. Echoing Marx in the *18th Brumaire*, incumbents and challengers find themselves operating in conditions beyond their control (broad destabilizing changes), but exercise agency in deciding what to do next (attribution, appropriation). In so

doing, McAdam effectively split the difference between Marx and Weber to produce a model extending from the broad destabilizing changes that are themselves rooted in social and economic transitions beyond the movement (figure 8.3).

This approach laid the groundwork for a generation of scholars focused on tracing the moment when communities realize that certain conditions contradict their interests. Surprisingly little work has been done to explain the relationship between these broad changes and those moments of realization. “Political opportunity” thinking emerged in an effort to describe the nature and operation of the broad destabilizing changes that “opened” or “closed” opportunities for challengers. Vibrant debate over what constitutes an open or closed system has evolved into a debate over perception of opportunity or threat, effectively (and deliberately) shifting the arena in question from structure (broad changes in a system) to agency (attribution and appropriation). I am in favor



**Figure 8.3**

McAdam's theory of the onset of contention. Source: Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

of these efforts to reclaim an important role for culture and emotion, but believe that a counterbalance is in order.

I am not alone. Andrew Walder has convincingly argued that a focus on the process of mobilization—the marshaling of resources, recruiting of adherents, and navigating of politics—leaves to the side a more pressing question: where do their ideologies, aims, motivations, and tactical choices come from?<sup>3</sup> While this may invite speculation about cultural norms, Walder’s answer is that they lie in broader factors and forces, and he advocates for the revival of explanations that draw on the causal power of social structures, as seen in the work of Michael Schwartz and Rory McVeigh.<sup>4</sup>

New work by Jeff Goodwin and Gabriel Hetland suggests that even identity movements and “post-materialist” movements are powerfully shaped by capitalism. Like Walder, they are at pains to remind movement scholars of the importance of scholars who identified the impact that “capitalist dynamics” had on movements (Tilly chief among them). After all, Goodwin and Hetland point out, many classic movement cases revolve around labor mobilization in sites of capitalist expansion and institutions—assembly lines, for example, are sites of both exploitation and collective identity.<sup>5</sup>

A parallel line of scholarship is rooted in the 1974 publication of Immanuel Wallerstein’s *The Modern World-System*. Wallerstein suggested changes in the means of production are important, as the world economy is predicated on a division of labor between (1) a hegemonic economic core, (2) a semi-periphery that facilitates transactions, finishes goods, and buffers shocks, and (3) a peripheral zone punctuated by extraction and exploitation.<sup>6</sup>

The means and system of production are *the* primary causal explanation for the situations that marginalized communities find themselves within. Scholars like Michael Schwartz suggest that protest groups develop assessments of the problem and decide on possible solutions based at least in part on their class position, itself tied back to the way in which labor markets are organized within a broader economic context punctuated by forces of production.<sup>7</sup>

My intent is not to resurrect a deterministic approach to technology, but to instead emphasize one way technology might have been more directly incorporated into social movement theories. An alternative history of mainstream movement thinking can perhaps be envisioned if we consider for a moment the way Tilly chose to address the role of technology in contention. In his influential *Regimes and Repertoires*, for example, technology is introduced just long enough to be dismissed on the grounds that technical innovations are subordinate to local political processes, and that “purposes override techniques.”<sup>8</sup>

Having disposed of the material by suggesting technological determinism is the only way to conceptualize technologies, and by dismissing technologies as mere “techniques,” Tilly introduces political opportunity structures, effectively directing the reader’s attention back to the realm of politics. Technologies are a subset of resources, to be sure, but their crucial role in shaping the organization of production is minimized.

Yet Tilly’s own argument for why particular repertoires emerged in England between 1750 and 1830 points to a number of factors that are fundamentally rooted in changes in technological innovation and transformations of the means of production, including their concentration, which led to the unique

growth of British capitalism<sup>9</sup> and the subsequent concentration of that capital, which then led to the proletarianization of the British workforce.<sup>10</sup> My goal here is not to set aside the key causal roles of political, social, or individual actors, but to instead highlight the enabling and constraining roles technologies play in already-familiar stories. Tilly's own causal argument relies on an understanding of technologies as more than broad enabling environmental factors.

Technology also stalks current theoretical accounts of movement emergence. Early resource-mobilization theorists John McCarthy and Mayer Zald identified the importance of key economic resources to movements.<sup>11</sup> This is usually seen in terms of financial capital, but may also be leadership capacity or technology transfers from elite supporters. These resources have the effect of providing selective incentives for engagement from prospective supporters<sup>12</sup> and also provide crucial institutional infrastructure necessary to pursue key movement goals.<sup>13</sup> What can these resources buy you? Buildings, tables, chairs, computers, posters, websites, busses and bikes, weapons, phones, and faxes, for example. New digital tools and techniques have served as key resources in many contemporary movements, and have considerably reduced the opportunity costs required for engagement.

The literature on issue framing is focused on the process of matching movement claims with social values, such that the movement's issue is actionable and legible to others, including bystanders, targets, and both current and prospective supporters.<sup>14</sup> Here technology makes an appearance, for example, through the media of pamphlets, newspapers, posters, webpages, Facebook groups, and hashtags. The role of the amplifying organization or institution, so prominent in scholarship in

the 1990s, is diminished significantly, since activists can use new digital technologies to more democratically crop, capture, and tag their own images.<sup>15</sup> One form of technology may replace another, as online connective technologies may slowly supplant the importance of bureaucracy and organization (though I find this to be quite unlikely).

The importance of technology in terms of resources and framing goes without saying, and indeed much of this volume has been dedicated to the technologies that make possible the capture, storage, distribution, interpretation, and spread of data. Clearly, tools and technologies are implicit, if unrecognized, in most conventional explanations of collective action. Our attention, however, might helpfully focus one step back in the process, as innovations in science and technology generate broad socioeconomic changes that create new socioeconomic issues while also opening the window of opportunity to new expressions of identity or rights claims, which themselves rely on tools and technologies, some borrowed directly, others invented or hacked to get the job done.<sup>16</sup>

Thinking about innovation directs our attention to the increased industrial capacity in the American North that led to the Great Migration, attracting African American laborers away from the South and in this way further undermining the cotton industry.<sup>17</sup> Such industrial capacity can be thought of in light of even larger historical economic processes driven by technological innovation and turnover in heavy machinery and other industrial equipment.<sup>18</sup>

Materialist projects face stiff resistance from critics who argue that they overlook what makes humans life what it is, especially emotions, culture, and contingency.<sup>19</sup> I am broadly



sympathetic to this criticism, as are some targets of this criticism,<sup>20</sup> but have decided to instead tack into the wind and argue that movement scholarship *has not taken technology seriously enough*. Stakeholders on both sides of the structuralist debate overlook the importance of materiality, the thingness of technologies, focusing instead on its supporting role in economic transformations. A sensible first step might involve better interrogating the relationship between macro-economic waves and contentious politics. This would set the stage for subsequent studies to follow the sociopolitical ramifications of whole technical systems or particular technologies along their trajectory.<sup>21</sup>

One could map, for example, the relationship between contentious politics and the emergence and evolution of such technical systems. This approach could prove useful—necessary perhaps—in helping anticipate the kind of contentious politics automation and artificial intelligence will precipitate. To be clear: material forces are not primordial and deterministic. Weber long ago observed that it was a particular set of cultural values that shaped markets, and Karl Polanyi emphasized that the state and political forces lay the groundwork for capitalist economies. Even Marx, often misread as a determinist, leaves room for humans to “make their own history” as they work to shape the pace and direction of technological innovation and adoption.<sup>22</sup>

Social and economic structures do not determine human events, but it would be foolish to think that humans shape history, individually or collectively, on our own terms. Technology is very much part and parcel of the circumstances that are “already given and transmitted from the past,” in Marx’s terms.<sup>23</sup> The hard work of teasing out the causal role of these structural forces and human agency has bedeviled a long line of social theorists,<sup>24</sup> so I

leave to others the more difficult empirical task of better linking these causal mechanisms to contentious politics.<sup>25</sup>

The point should now be clear: incorporating technology into our theorizing raises important questions for anyone interested in explaining or understanding collective action. I close this book in interesting times. Newly invigorated nationalist parties in settled democracies have clearly demonstrated that the status quo is broken. Radical changes in the means of production have not been matched by radical changes in democracies' ability to hold the powerful to account and distribute gains equitably. Quite the inverse is on display: the strong do what they will and the weak suffer what they must. One point I hope to have made in this theoretical afterword is that an understanding of our times requires attention to technology, both in how it may aid people-power mobilization and also in the ways it makes this mobilization necessary.

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# The Good Drone

## How Social Movements Democratize Surveillance

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