Beyond Rational Choice: Ideational Assault and the Use of Delegitimation Frames in Nonviolent Revolutionary Movements

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BEYOND RATIONAL CHOICE: IDEATIONAL ASSAULT AND THE STRATEGIC USE OF FRAMES IN NONVIOLENT CIVIL RESISTANCE

John A. Gould and Edward Moe

ABSTRACT

We examine the rational utility and social-psychological approaches to develop fresh insights into nonviolent civil resistance. Rational utility models provide a useful, even essential, starting point for understanding what movement organizers must do if they are to overcome their movement’s collective action problems. However, the model’s spare definition of agency excludes an investigation of regime legitimacy, how it is constructed and the role it plays in regime continuity. Employing a social psychological approach, we introduce the concept of “ideational assault” in which movement organizers challenge the ideas that justify voluntary civic cooperation with the ruling order. Ideational assault seeks “rhetorical coercion” in which the regime is stripped of credible arguments in its own defense and must increasingly rule by sanctions alone. Ideational assaults employ frames that delegitimize the prevailing
order and mobilize people to act against it. By examining several frame forms, including, calls to action, symbolic jiu-jitsu, honor, and moral appeal, we cast new light on the ideational battle that rages alongside the fight for control of the streets. We conclude by arguing that students of nonviolent civil resistance should consult both the rational and social–psychological approaches in their analysis.

**Keywords:** Social movements; nonviolence; frames; rational choice; constructivism; social psychology; ideas; demobilization; ideational assault; collective action

**INTRODUCTION**

Nonviolent civil resistance movements constitute a significant development in recent political history. To understand how they work, we explore the strengths and weaknesses of two analytical lenses: rational utility and social psychology. Thanks to its simplicity and predictive power, the assumption of rational utility maximization is arguably the dominant approach to agency in much of the social sciences. We demonstrate its analytical value here by developing the “social movement growth cycle” – a model that explains the rapid growth of some movements. While it is only part of the story, people do respond to material incentives, which hinder or promote rapid movement growth and shape regime supporters’ choices about defecting to the opposition.

Yet the rational utility maximization assumption is ultimately incomplete. It offers no explanation of why people assign value to resistance. It simply assumes that there is a pool of potential resisters ready to cast their lot against the regime should the benefits become sufficiently apparent and the costs sufficiently low. Indeed, the model is silent on grievances – how they are constructed and felt, and how they can become a focal point for collective action. Nor can the model easily explain altruism – the altogether common act of individual self-sacrifice for a nonmaterial cause.

In short, the utility maximization model draws its power from a restricted model of human agency, but directs attention away from certain aspects of human behavior – such as emotion, social identity, and culture – that are crucial to nonviolent civil resistance. In Part II of this paper we introduce a social–psychological model of agents, which assumes agents process information through emotional responses reflecting their social setting. We
then follow strategic nonviolent conflict pioneer Gene Sharp as well as Nobel prize-winning economist Douglass North, by exploring the concept of regime legitimacy. Political order, we join them in arguing, emerges not just from material sanctions; it also springs from regime legitimacy measured by North (1981, pp. 81–109) as the total value of citizens’ voluntary, nonutility-enhancing material contributions to political order. It is thus a partial function of citizens’ social and emotional judgments about what is right rather than simply what is in their individual material self-interest. Compulsion plays a role in constructing political order, but so too do the ideas in people’s heads.

The implication is that regimes are vulnerable to what we call “ideational assault,” an attack on the ideas that motivate citizens’ willingness to voluntarily cooperate with the regime. To examine this idea, Part II looks in particular at what we call mobilization and delegitimization frames. Frames are rhetorical constructs that carry emotionally laden and socially defined messages about how we should interpret reality (Benford & Snow, 2000; McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996, pp. 5–7; Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986). In the right hands, they manipulate emotions and social constructions of identity – including constructs of gender, class, nationality, or humanity – in ways that weaken regime justifications for power and motivate people to engage in anti-regime activities.

We use the concepts of ideational assault and frames to develop new insights into the war of ideas that precedes the nonviolent battle for the streets. Nonviolent resistance movements employ a number of frame vehicles, including mobilization drives, dilemma actions, humor, and moral conversion. Each draws its power from the deft manipulation of emotions and identities that cannot be modeled using the rational utility assumption of agency. Moreover, by examining the ideational threat each poses to the regime we gain new insights into the strengths and weaknesses of various modes of movement mobilization and attack.

We do not ask our readers to throw out the utility maximization model. Rather, we ask that they constructively engage with two models of agents, a rational choice model that captures the material costs and benefits of action and a social–psychological model that embeds actors in socioemotional settings from which they derive preferences for action. Civil resistance cannot succeed without understanding the material incentives they face. Rational utility thus has an important role to play in the field. Yet, limiting analysis to its limited preset preference is like confining one’s search for lost keys to the area under the streetlight. One might find what one is looking for, but chances are the answer lies elsewhere.
THE UTILITY-MAXIMIZING AGENT

A rational utility model does not describe reality, but rather produces heuristic models that make generally reliable predictions about social phenomena. Rational choice, according to John Elster, assumes that agents choose the best alternative from a feasible set of outcomes. The model gains predictive power by assuming that agents hold a consistently ordered set of physical and psychological needs and that they seek to acquire them (1986, p. 4, 27). This is what we shall refer to hereafter as maximizing utility. In the following section, we develop an extension and a critique of the rational utility approach to social movement theory.

Utility is a subjective concept. Our utility is not always the same as yours. However, the rational choice goal of making predictions requires specifying a priori exactly what sort of utility we are expected to maximize. The rational choice model is compatible with different utility functions, but most analysts use the prior assumption that agents maximize their material wellbeing – the more the better.

The Rational Insurgent Problem

The problem with the rational utility maximization assumption is that it cannot accommodate nonmaterial goal-seeking behavior. If one takes the strict rational utility maximization assumption literally, for example, it makes little rational material sense for an individual to join a social movement – especially in a revolt against a highly repressive regime. Membership in a nonviolent civil resistance costs the individual time, energy, and resources. These costs can extend to social ostracism, unemployment, poverty, imprisonment, and even death. Meanwhile, the potential utility gains from participation are frequently distant and highly uncertain. At the start of any movement, it is often unclear whether an individual’s efforts will bring any medium or long-term improvement in one’s material welfare. It may even lead to a permanent decrease. So why would one take the risk? (Fig. 1).

We call this the problem of rational insurgents. It is not a new problem. Many scholars of have struggled with it (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011, p. 38; Kuran, 1991, pp. 7–48; North, 1981, p. 54; Tarrow, 1994, p. 6; Tucker, 2007, pp. 535–551; Tullock, 1971, pp. 89–99; Varshney, 2003, pp. 82–99). Indeed, rational choice theory provides several problematic responses. Some scholars, for example, resort to a more expansive
definition of what is rational. Douglass North, invokes the term “ideology” to account for times when an actor fails to maximize his material utility. Ideology is measured as the cost differential between what actually happened and what should have happened had actors maximized their material wellbeing. While people do worry about material concerns, North argues, their “ideological views may frequently lead them to engage in very substantial sacrifices.” This, according to North, allows individuals to join movements at a personal material cost: “The stronger the ideological conviction of the participants, the greater the price they will be willing to pay” to help the movement (North, 1990, p. 85; Elster, 1986, p. 24).

North invites investigation into an alternative model of agents, but he does not provide it. The useful assumption that agents will act to maximize their utility thus takes us only so far. Below, we shall recast agents as socially embedded actors who build their preference from sets of emotions, cultural scripts, and group norms as well as from observable sensitivity to the material costs and benefits of action revealed by rational choice. By beginning with complex socially and emotionally rooted actors we do less violence to reality in building our models. Most of all we avoid making a false puzzle out of material self-sacrifice when it, as North reminds us, is a “ubiquitous” element of human behavior (North, 1981, p. 45).
The Social Movement Dilemma

The rational choice paradigm nevertheless makes an important contribution to the study of civil resistance. In this section, we develop a collective action model that is consistent with the rational material utility-maximizing agent. First, however, we need to point out that a broad range of possible resources and challenges shape agents’ utility calculations. There are extensive literatures emphasizing the role structures play in movement formation (Goldstone et al., 2010; Skocpol, 1979; Tarrow, 1994, p. 93). While we feel that an exploration of structure should not detract from the importance of agency, we do agree that political opportunities shape the risks of joining a social movement and the possibility of realizing its goals. These include the openness of the regime to political contestation (Goodwin, 2001; Levitsky & Way, 2002; Marchant & Puddington, 2008; Tarrow, 1994), the degree of unity amongst elites (O’Donnell, Schmitter, & Whitehead, 1986; Przeworski, 1991; Schock, 2005, pp. 30, 168–169), the availability of third party allies, either domestic or international (Clark, 2009; Keck & Sikkink, 1998), the number and configuration of rival challengers (Tarrow, 1994, pp. 81–100), the propensity of the regime to use violence (McAdam et al., 1996, p. 10; Schock, 2005, p. 32), and in the case of violent insurgencies the immediate availability of lootable resources (Collier, 2000).

Similarly, resource mobilization theories argue that movements arise when organizations obtain the resources to sustain a social movement of discontented people. They can emphasize financial and organizational resources (McCarthy & Zald, 2009) and the importance of preexisting and developing networks in movement mobilization (Ackerman & Kruegler, 1994, p. 29; Gould, 1991; Snow et al., 1986; Tarrow, 1994, pp. 135–150). An often overlooked resource is the strategic acumen of movement leaders in a waging nonviolent struggle against the regime (see, e.g., Ackerman & Kruegler, 1994; Ackerman & Duvall, 2001, 2005; Helvey, 2004; Popović, Mišivojević, & Djinović, 2006; Sharp, 1973, 2003; Sharp & Paulson, 2005).

A rational utility-maximizing approach is entirely compatible with these theories of resources and opportunity structures. Yet, while such factors change the rational incentives that agents face, they do not fully address the collective action problems that arise when agents challenge a repressive regime. A collective action problem exists when the sum total of individual rational decisions leads to a collectively irrational outcome. Many such problems can be effectively modeled by the Prisoner’s Dilemma (Oye, 1986), relabeled here the “Social Movement Dilemma.” The structure of the dilemma is built on three logical conclusions of the rational utility-maximizing
assumptions. First, as noted, joining a movement (J) can be risky and costly (the problem of self-interest). Second, joining only makes rational sense if one is sure that others will join as well (the problem of assurance). Finally, one prefers others to bear the cost of driving change (the problem of free riding).

Since one would prefer to free ride and, because one has no assurance that others will not free ride on one’s own efforts, the best rational option is to stay home (D). Paradoxically, if everyone makes the same choice, no collective action will take place (DD). The utility maximization assumption thus produces the following familiar hierarchy of preferred strategic choices and predicts an outcome at number 3, the status quo, as given in Table 1.

Other things remaining equal, the most profitable choice is to stay at home. Yet, given that collections of individuals quite frequently produce large-scale cooperative outcomes (JJ), rational choice analysts seek solutions that are compatible with the rational utility-maximizing assumption. Collective action theorist Mancur Olson, for example, shows how small groups can both offer individuals a greater share of the collective benefit and identify and penalize free riders (1965, pp. 63–64). Large groups like trade unions cannot do this. They require institutional forms of compulsion, such as mandatory union membership and dues. Without them, the public good of worker representation will be underprovided. Unions that rely on the hard work and sacrifice of only a few activists are unlikely to last long. A good set of social institutions is therefore necessary to provide public goods (Olson, 1965, pp. 13–16, 64–65, 91).

This solution to the collective action problem, however, fails to capture the frequent sacrifices that people are regularly willing to make even on behalf of a large group (Parsons, 2005). Sidney Tarrow asserts that Olson presents a theory of interest groups, rather than of social movements. Interest groups (like unions and business associations) form to deliver material utility to their members and are thus more likely to behave in accordance with the material-utility-maximization assumption. By contrast,

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Order of Preferences</th>
<th>You</th>
<th>Others</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Free ride (best)</td>
<td>Don’t join (D)</td>
<td>Join (J)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mass movement (good)</td>
<td>Join</td>
<td>Join</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. No movement (status quo)</td>
<td>Don’t join</td>
<td>Don’t join</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Sucker’s payoff (worst)</td>
<td>Join</td>
<td>Don’t join</td>
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social movements often seek objectives that have little to do with personal material utility. Members thus may be more likely to sacrifice material welfare for nonmaterial goals (1994, pp. 14–15). One therefore can and should expect greater material self-sacrifice from individuals within social movements – but we still need a model of individual agency to explain it. In addition, even small civic resistance groups are unlikely to receive any net material benefit at the start. Generally, they can expect quite the opposite. Olson’s materialist explanations for small group cooperation thus correlate to outcomes, but do not explain them.

Other rational choice theorists have specifically engaged the social movement dilemma with greater success. Observing the Central European movements of 1989, Timur Kuran developed a collective action theory of the “revolutionary bandwagon” that is consistent with the material utility-maximizing agent. Due to the high cost of opposition to authoritarian regimes, people rationally hide anti-regime sentiment. Yet, at times, the political opportunity structure changes in ways that dramatically reduces the cost of revealing one’s real feelings – allowing the most daring regime opponents to openly express their true preferences for regime change. Their open opposition, in turn, lowers the risk of voicing opposition for the more timid (see also, Beissinger, 2002, p. 96; Treisman, 2011, pp. 185–186). If this dynamic continues to ripple through society, it produces a cascade of support for anti-regime action (Kuran, 1991, pp. 16–25).

We summarize Kuran’s argument in the $2 \times 2$ matrix in Table 2. A society is primed for a revolutionary bandwagon when a significant number of citizens are cowed into lying about their real preferences, as indicated in the upper right hand cell of Table 2.

The trigger of the cascade is exogenous to the model. People might be emboldened by some major developments such as the “Sinatra doctrine” in which Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev’s minister promised not to intervene to preserve communist regimes in Central Europe (Glenn, 2001, pp. 13–18; Oberschall, 1996, pp. 94–95; Smithy & Kurtz, 1999). Or, models

<table>
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<th>Private Preference</th>
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<tr>
<td>Oppose regime</td>
<td>Regime opponent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support regime</td>
<td>Preference falsifier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Preference falsifier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regime supporter</td>
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of successful revolts elsewhere might help lower perceived costs and raise the apparent likelihood of success (Beissinger, 2007; but see also Tarrow, 1994). As resistance to the regime proliferates, the material risk of openly supporting the regime grows, leading to an explosion in the number of regime supporters who hide their true feelings behind fake sentiments of opposition (Kuran, 1991, pp. 16–25). While Kuran does not fully extrapolate, we can do so here. With regime support stigmatized, free riding (DJ) now carries a penalty and hence slips in the preference structure; the “Social Movement Dilemma” transforms into what we call the “Social Movement Stag Hunt” (Table 3).

In the stag hunt scenario, the expected utility of joining is greater than that of free riding (JJ > DJ), but there may be additional social and psychological benefits that raise one’s incentive to participate. There are still assurance problems – people fear the sucker’s payoff most of all – but given the cascading growth of opposition to the regime, the risk of showing up alone is minimized. Collective action is thus more probable.

Joshua Tucker develops this explanation in greater detail. Tucker explains the phenomenon of the “Colored Revolutions” in Eurasia between 2000 and 2005 by arguing that fraudulent elections provided a coordinating focal point that helped opponents simultaneously overcome their collective action problems. Electoral fraud exposes an entire population to a deeply felt regime abuse, instantly creating an “imagined community of robbed voters” (Anderson, 2006; Thompson & Kunz, 2004; Tucker, 2007, p. 541). The sense of collective outrage and a desire for immediate redress drastically reduces the assurance problem – people go into the street because they know others will too. Moreover, with mass action, the chances of success are higher and the risks of participation are lower – raising the expected utility of joining. Tucker adds that short time horizons raise the opportunity cost of doing nothing. Protestors realize that it is “now or never.” Rationally, it makes greater sense to join (Tucker, 2007, pp. 540–542).

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<td>Sucker’s payoff (worst)</td>
<td>Join</td>
<td>Don't join</td>
</tr>
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Table 3. Social Movement Stag Hunt.
It seems reasonable at this point to assemble these rationalist approaches together to postulate what we call a social movement growth cycle (Fig. 2).

In our model, bystanders become activists when an exogenous shift—some form of “meat shock” (Jasper, 1999) reduces the utility of sitting out the movement. A virtuous growth cycle can follow. A larger movement ensures that the use of repression is spread over a greater number of individuals. With safety in numbers, people become less afraid of the regime. This further lowers the free-rider and assurance problems inducing even more people to join the movement. In addition, as success becomes more of a possibility, the expected benefits of joining increase. This also accelerates the cycle.

A favorable configuration of the political opportunity structure and abundant movement resources can further catalyze growth. It helps, for example, when potentially anti-regime recruitment networks are highly developed and easily retooled to the task of regime resistance (Snow, Zurcher, & Ekland-Olson, 1980; Gould, 1991; McAdam, 1990). Unified oppositions, homogenous ethnic or cultural identities, nonviolent discipline, and deep disagreements among the regime elite are all additional factors to consider (Nepstad, 2011, pp. 133–135).

Finally, movements have an advantage when the regime intensively depends on the population for its revenue. Indeed, one of the most important insights of “resource curse theory” is that undemocratic regimes gain significant independence from their societies when they do not have to tax them to make ends meet. A resource rich regime does not have to ask as much from their societies. Societies, consequently, have fewer opportunities

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![Figure 2](image-url)  

Fig. 2. The Social Movement Growth Cycle.
for noncooperation in their arsenal (Ear, 2006; Gould & Sickner, 2008; Gould & Winters, 2011; Knack, 2001).

Note that nonviolent discipline is important to keep the cycle flowing in the correct direction. Violence against security forces – even by a separate “radical flank” movement – raises the stakes of the game for the security forces and hence makes them more likely to carry out orders to repress the movement (Nepstad, 2011, p. 129), where, by contrast, nonviolent oppositions can encourage the defection of the security forces, they have proven to be 46 times more likely to succeed (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011, p. 22). A break in nonviolent discipline also conspires to keep participation numbers low. The need to specialize in weaponry raises the barrier to entry into the insurgency. Meanwhile, the use of arms against a better-armed state increases the risk of participation and lowers the likelihood of success in any calculation of expected utility. Fewer people are willing or have the resources to take the risk (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). Smaller numbers of armed insurgents, in turn, increase the chance that one will be imprisoned, wounded or killed. Combined, these factors raise the free-rider premium and reduce insurgent’s assurance that others will act with them.

Not surprisingly, then, it has been empirically demonstrated that violent insurgencies tend to be much smaller than nonviolent movements (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011, pp. 33–34). They proliferate where alternative opportunities for young men are minimal and where the high cost of taking up arms against the state is offset by high immediate benefits. Armed rebels are thus quite likely to complement their struggles to address a grievance with looting, extortion and other forms of predation (Collier, 2000). It is correspondingly no coincidence that violent insurgencies are unlikely to produce lasting peace or democratic outcomes (Karatnycky & Ackerman, 2005; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). Most damning of all, they rarely succeed in achieving their goals (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011, pp. 73–78), and often never intend to. Indeed, with leaders getting rich from conflict, instability and lawlessness become lasting insurgent assets (Andreas, 2004, pp. 3–9; Collier, 2000). By contrast, nonviolent movements tend to seek broad goals that benefit much wider segments of society (Moyer, 2001, pp. 1–8) and are thus more likely to produce lasting stability and democratic governance in the aftermath of conflict (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011, pp. 209–218).

The rational utility-maximizing assumption thus explains a lot, and we would be foolish to dismiss its insights. However, the model is so extraordinarily spare that it leaves a great deal of the social movement story out. Kurian’s explanation is entirely focused on a single change to the
political opportunity structure. This initial event is exogenous to his model—he understandably does not attempt to explain how an agent might engineer such a shock or why such a shock would resonate with a group while other events would not. Kuran also assumes that revolutions are more likely in societies where very few people believe in the legitimacy of the regime, but he is silent on how movement agency can help bring this about. Similarly, Tucker limits his empirical analysis to one phenomenon, electoral fraud. This too under-specifies the role of movement resources and other aspects of the political opportunity structure in engineering a regime crisis.

Both models ultimately rely on socially constructed focal points for collective action (Goldstein & Koehane, 1993), or what sociologist James Jasper would call “a moral shock” (Jasper, 1999). While Tucker emphasizes electoral fraud, such shocks have been provided by other events in other contexts—the details of which can be uncovered through empirical investigations into locally constructed collective narratives evoking social norms and scripts for action. Both also say little about agency—implying that opponents merely have to wait until a bungled “managed election” falls into their lap.

More broadly, the utility-maximizing approach leaves questions unanswered that are crucial to understanding the formation and success of anti-regime social movements. Why are some “moral shocks” such “transformative events” (Hess & Martin, 2006; Sewell, 1996) and others not? How are grievances against the regime constructed? Why do people join a movement—often at deep personal expense and risk? How do group identities and social networks affect movement mobilization? (Snow et al., 1980) Finally, why do some people facing similar material incentives change allegiances while others do not? These questions show the need to expand our model of agency beyond a strict rational choice framework.

**A SOCIAL–PSYCHOLOGICAL MODEL OF AGENTS**

We answer these questions in two steps. First, we expand our model of agents to include emotions and ideational variables such as identity, beliefs, and culture in preference formation. Second, we develop an understanding of regime power that includes an explanation for “willing volunteers”—those who freely sacrifice to support the regime because they believe it is the right thing to do.

The first task is to develop a social–psychological model of behavior. Breaking away from the rational utility-maximizing agent deprives our
thinking of parsimony, but it allows us to take into consideration a wide range of factors empirically demonstrated to play a role in movement mobilization and effectiveness, including a will to material self-sacrifice, emotional reasoning, culturally resonant shocks, group and network identity bonds, and the need to affirm personal beliefs. These are all resources that movements use to recruit members and undermine regime support.

*Emotions, Motivated Reasoning, and Moral Shocks*

An analysis of how emotions affect decision-making is critical to the study of civic resistance. Neurobiological research and economists’ discussions of bounded rationality suggest that individuals rarely make purely “rational” decisions. Indeed, thought structures are shaped by one’s bias, uncertainty, and emotional state (e.g., Koehler, 1993; Loewenstein, Weber, Hsee, & Welch, 2001; Schwarz, 2000; Weinberger & Westen, 2008). Emotions in particular express powerful subconscious cues that can tip the balance when decisions need to be made quickly and efficiently (Bechara & Damasio, 2005), and they often have predictive power (cf. Elster, 1998; Lerner & Dacher, 2000; Rick & Loewenstein, 2008). They also shape our estimates of worth, or preference structures, and indeed our very determination of “material value.”

Social movements traffic in emotions. They build strength from preexisting (dis)affections (e.g., love, hatred) and reactions (e.g., hope, anger); and they retain membership by building new affections within the movement and disaffections without the movement (Jasper, 2009, p. 181). Emotions are also important to understanding the challenges anti-regime movements face in their campaign to undermine the loyalties of regime supporters. Supporters, like most people, engage in “motivated reasoning” in which one subconsciously avoids conclusions that carry negative emotional weight (Lerner & Dacher, 2000; Westen, Blagov, Harenski, Kilts, & Hamann, 2006). This helps explain people’s willingness to accept regime justifications for rule – even when they are patently false.

Motivated reasoning helps us to understand the importance of a moral shock (Jasper, 1999) in mobilizing supporters and winning adherents among pro-regime soft liners and security forces. Given that people discount discordant information to preserve their beliefs, an extreme revelation – rooted in culturally shared ideas about what is right, wrong, or fair – may be required to produce a cognitive shift.
Morally shocking events will not only contribute to a cognitive transformation among moderate supporters and opponents, they also create emotionally laden frames of reference around which regime opponents can mobilize (Tucker, 2007). Shocks furnish incongruent information that challenges the myths justifying regime legitimacy. They make it possible that regime supporters will experience “cognitive dissonance” – a sense that something is not right with the regime’s behavior that makes supporters begin to question their basic beliefs (Jervis, 1976, pp. 382–436; Koehler, 1993; Westen et al., 2006).

Finally, emotions make possible moral conversion, what Gandhi referred to as “soul-force” (Gandhi, 2004, p. 81). We define conversion as a process whereby a regime supporter comes to empathize more with her nonviolent opposition than the regime she supports. It might occur simply because the opponent’s case makes logical sense. Yet, a regime convert may also experience an internal emotional response based on shared identity at some level. She might develop empathy with protestors or desire to bring her actions into line with her basic beliefs by switching allegiances.

Networks, Groups, and Identity

One of the most important and powerful categories of emotion is affection (or disaffection) for others. Research shows that otherwise similarly motivated people are more likely to join a movement when they have affective ties to movement members (McAdam, 1990; Simon & Klandermans, 2001, p. 327, 329; Snow et al., 1980). People often want to become part of a group (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 522) and they do so for emotional as well as material benefits (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Smith & Henry, 1996). People strongly connected to a group will frequently subordinate their own welfare to collective needs. They may even reorient parts of their own identity to match group norms and beliefs.

Often the reference group can be virtual. Journalism, literature, films, music, blogs, or popular history carry shared narratives and experiences that can knit a collective identity among people who have never met (Anderson, 2006; Tarrow, 1994, pp. 48–61). Social definitions of morality shape emotional responses and determine, for example, what one thinks is shocking, reassuring, or outrageous. In sum, shared identities, norms and beliefs make possible “imagined communities” of the aggrieved, opening the possibility of spontaneous consensus around culturally determined scripts spelling out an appropriate reaction to a moral shock (Anderson, 2006).
Participation can also be self-perpetuating. A successful insurgent experience can reinforce group identification and increasing motivation for additional action (Drury & Reicher, 2009). Activists identify more intensely with their group when it comes to conflict. Drury and Reicher show how indiscriminate attacks on moderately engaged participants can have a radicalization effect—greatly increasing their participation in the future (2009).

Shared group identities are therefore important determinants of how we perceive and process emotion and correspondingly how we reason and act. Similarly, social differentiation may be important to group cohesion. Collective feelings of “we-ness” may be easier to maintain if there is a distinct alternative.

In sum, a model of the agent rooted in social psychology envisions a world in which agent interests are inseparable from the social, political, and the cultural environments in which they are embedded (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, 2001; Subotic, 2011). Emotions and group identity shape self-interest to favor sometimes costly individual contributions to collective goals; and they provide insight into the mechanisms by which group identities are constructed and reinforced.

Most importantly, a social model of agents does not make a false puzzle out of the decision to engage in nonviolent civil resistance. Movements operate in a world where the free-rider premium is highly variable and can often be negative. It is more often a “stag hunt” world, where trust is built on a commonly held expectation of group solidarity and where “assurance” often comes from the realization that most people would prefer being included over being than left out.

The Ideational Bases of Regime Power

Before we can investigate the role of “ideational assault” on regime legitimacy, we must first understand regime power and the role citizens play in generating it. Following Gandhi, Sharp argues that power is more than simply the ability to compel or entice people into doing something they would not have done otherwise (Baldwin, 1989, pp. 58–81; Dahl, 1991, pp. 12–26; Sharp, 1973). Power comes from the ruler’s ability to convince subjects to voluntarily obey the rules, norms, and decision-making procedures of the regime. Power thus stems from the citizens’ sense of regime “legitimacy” (Lukes, 1974; Merriman, 2009, p. 18; North, 1981, pp. 81–109; Sharp, 1973, p. 16). Because legitimacy makes voluntary cooperation with
regime order possible, it is a vital regime resource. It “means that the ruler
does not have to expend additional resources to ensure continued
obedience” (Merriman, 2009, p. 18). Without legitimacy, actors disobey
rules wherever it suits their material interest—making rule virtually

Given that much of regime order comes from voluntary and often
materially costly self-sacrifice of citizens, regimes are vulnerable to what we
call “ideational assaults.” Ideational assaults attack regime legitimacy, paving
the way for mass disobedience. Delegitimizing an authoritarian regime
is no easy task. Supporters often have a high material stake in the regime
that they are quite likely to protect through psychologically motivated
reasoning or social differentiation.

Regimes, according to Max Weber, must justify their “domination” in
their bid for the voluntary obedience of their people. He provides three
different “ideal types” of justification, each with its own internal logic,
charismatic, traditional, and legal. In reality, Weber argued, regimes
always draw from a combination of these three ideal types of legitimation
(1968; Bendix, 1960). We suggest a fourth type—the blackmail justification.
Authoritarians frequently use blackmail logic to emphasize the necessity of
the regime’s rule given the alternatives. In the Arab Spring uprisings,
virtually every incumbent president used fears of “strife” (fitna), or an
Islamic fundamentalist or sectarian takeover in an attempt to discredit his
opposition. Similarly, former Serb president Slobodan Milošević’s propa-
gandists dismissed his civic opponents as “terrorists.” The deliberate
intention of such blackmail rhetoric is to polarize society; to frighten
supporters into solidarity with the regime; and to coerce, shame, or intimi-
date opponents into exile or silence. This allows the regime to dominate
political space (Gagnon, 2006, pp. 1–51).

Blackmail rhetoric accuses opponents of naively or deliberately exposing
the country to an existential threat. If the threat does not actually exist, or is
of insufficient magnitude to justify draconian policies, the regime will often
exaggerate or even manufacture a conflict to ensure that popular
conceptions of reality match regime rhetoric. The image of a state under
attack raises the political stakes of the game on all sides. Regime supporters
will value regime continuity even more because it now appears crucial to
their personal wellbeing. Meanwhile, the risk of moderate opposition to
 hard line measures increases as critics become vulnerable to accusations of
betrayal or naïveté in the face of a dire threat.

Within this rhetorical/policy setting, rulers can more credibly decide who
“deserves” to participate in political life. A climate of fear and “with us or
against us” rhetoric neutralizes moderates through social opprobrium, state intimidation, arrest, or exile (Gagnon, 2006, pp. 31–51). As moderates disappear, cracks between hard line and soft line regime supporters fuse and disappear.

When rule is “legitimate” in this sense, citizens voluntarily comply with the formal and informal rules of a distinctly illiberal public order. This provides the regime with the public good (or in this case public bad) of cheap cooperation with authoritarian order and lowers the need to use positive and negative sanctions to rule.

This “flip side” is that a regime’s reliance on blackmail rhetoric leaves it vulnerable to ideational assault and mass disobedience. It helps that arguments underlying authoritarian blackmail often contain blatant lies, myths, distortions, and exaggerations. Under the right conditions, regime rhetoric can be ridiculed and falsified – leaving the regime defender with nothing credible to say in his defense.

**Framing Resistance**

Ideational assaults challenge regimes through interconnected processes of regime delegitimization and civic (re)nobilization. Both entail a significant struggle with the regime over the “framing” of legitimate political action (Schatz, 2009). Frames are strategically deployed rhetorical constructs that attempt to “align” the movement’s understanding of a social problem with popular emotions informed by preexisting social narratives and scripts for action (Goffman, 1974; Snow et al., 1986). Frames orient political thought and action around collective constructions of group identity – invoking emotions directly connected to key self-conceptions of identity such as gender, race, sexuality, nationality, or humanity.

While frames perform a multiplicity of functions (Schock, 2005, p. 27; Snow & Benford, 1988, pp. 199–204), we are interested here in how they dismantle a system of ideational control based on blackmail legitimacy and the demobilization of opponents. We thus focus on the strategic use of “remobilization” and “delegitimization” frames (see also Glenn, 2003, pp. 25–26). Remobilization frames generate emotional impulses for civic action by tapping into group identities, norms, and scripts from an angle that favors the opposition. Delegitimization frames directly challenge rhetoric that justifies an authoritarian’s hold on power. They are an attempted exercise in what Ronald Krebs and Patrick Jackson call “rhetorical coercion,” in which individuals no longer embrace the beliefs,
rhetorical platitudes, and habits of the dominant order (2007). By attaching alternate meanings to collective identities, oppositions can employ frames strategically to motivate collective action and delegitimize the regime’s demobilization rhetoric. We now turn to look at five specific vehicles that anti-regime movements employ to carry frames.

Identity-Based (Re)mobilization

A video blog by Egyptian democracy activist Asmaa Mahfouz gives a good example of a powerful identity-based mobilization frame. Mahfouz was a member of the Egyptian April 6th movement whose invitation to protest helped “spark” the successful January 25, 2011 uprising in Egypt. In the “vlog,” Mahfouz attempts to overcome her movement’s free-rider and assurance problems by challenging Egyptian constructions of masculinity, morality, and patriotism:

Whoever says women should not go to protests because they will get beaten, let him have some honor and manhood and come with me on January 25th… Your presence with us will make a difference. A big difference! … If you have dignity and honor as a man, come protect me and other girls at the protest. If you stay at home, then you deserve all that is being done to you … you’ll be responsible for what happens to us on the street while you sit at home… Come down with us and demand your rights, my rights, your family’s rights! (Mahfouz, 2011)

Mahfouz’s vlog is carefully crafted to overcome and transform the social movement dilemma. By appealing to Egyptian constructions of masculinity, family, community, and nation, she hopes to manipulate the listeners’ emotional attachments to groups that formulate their core identities. In particular, she invokes patriarchal constructions of masculinity among young Egyptian men to manufacture “a duty” to protect the rights and safety of their families, women, and nation through protest. Mahfouz thus attempts a game-transforming gambit. She – like many others in the opposition – uses patriarchy to create a stage in which staying at home carries a stigma. Where it works, the free-rider premium will be negative, making it easier for activists to trigger the social movement growth cycle.

“Vlogged” on January 18th, 2011, Mahfouz’s call to action “went viral” in Egypt and helped transform the uprising from a small group of hard core activists into a mass protest. It is of course doubtful that men protested solely to prove their masculinity and patriotism – and a large number of women also participated. Yet, actual motives are less important (and often indiscernible in any case) than the rhetoric associated with their revealed
action (Krebs & Jackson, 2007, p. 57). Through successful manipulation of emotions and socially constructed identities, actors like Mahfouz made it rhetorically indefensible for many men to remain at home without being exposed to their peers’ accusations of unmanliness, selfishness, and a lack of patriotism. By attempting to capture the rhetorical center and by main-streaming the normative expectation of activism, Mahfouz sought to rearrange the social norms of an important sector of Egyptian society in a way that favored political action against the regime.

**Dilemma Actions**

One of the most important frame vehicles is the dilemma action. Dilemma actions place authorities in a position where they must either concede political space to opponents or order an action that undermine regime claims to power. They thus use the regime’s biggest strength – its superiority in the use of repression and violence – against itself. Sharp and others have called this “political jiu-jitsu” (2005, pp. 405–407; Helvey, 2004, p. 150; Popović et al., 2006). However, given that dilemma actions delegitimize regimes by exposing the hypocrisy and absurdity of regime rhetoric and symbols, we prefer to use the term “symbolic jiu-jitsu.” Ideational factors drive the dilemma. Dilemma actions can also serve as mobilization frames. Since they can unleash powerful emotions of anger and disgust among sympathizers and create cognitive discomfort among regime supporters, they also play a role in movement mobilization and regime decomposition.

The nonviolent identity of the movement and its members’ willingness to suffer a personal material cost for their cause is an important starting point for many dilemma actions. Regime attacks on nonviolent protestors rebound on the regime when they generate popular emotional revulsion rooted in tensions within the constructed social understandings that underpin identity (Kurtz, 2011). For example, in the Bulldozer revolution in Serbia, organizers often placed women in the front ranks of the protests – exploiting patriarchal Balkan constructions of gender that place wives, daughters, and mothers in a protected role. Organizers thus confronted security forces with a no-win choice: either do nothing – allowing the demonstrators to seize political space previously controlled by the regime – or attack a protected group and risk causing a popular backlash.¹

Serbia’s opposition performed a similar trick with constructions of patriotism in its struggle against Milošević. To protest the trials of young draft avoiders, organizers brought young army veterans to the
demonstration. “Patriots” were thus used to defend so-called “traitors.”
Given the regime’s insistence that its opponents were traitors who
contributed to an existential threat to the nation, police were forced to
choose between beating peaceful veterans – making themselves look
unpatriotic – or allowing the civil demonstration to go on (Collin, 2001,
p. 177).

Symbolic Flanking

Security forces often have little compunction about beating even women,
children, and veterans. Still, because it is risky politically, and rhetorically
problematic to attack a nonviolent protected group, regimes also engage in
what we call symbolic flanking. Symbolic flanking aspires to dismantle a
dilemma action by challenging the opposition’s frame. In Egypt, for
example, state security forces slandered female activists, like Mahfouz, as a
separate group of women who by “mixing” with men in political protest,
lacked or had lost their “honor.” Violent police attacks on women were then
justified using the same patriarchal gender constructions framing honor
killings. Women activists in Egypt thus were often singled out for
particularly brutal treatment – including severe beatings, sexual harassment,
and even virginity tests. Patriarchal norms justified violence that sought to
exclude women from politics: “honorable” women should remain apolitical
and at home.2

Intersectional Frame Conflicts

Activists may experience internal tension when deciding how to respond to
such symbolic flanking (Tarrow, 1994, pp. 97–98). Civil nonviolent
insurgents may choose to become less threatening and more conventional
to broaden their appeal. Doing so risks ignoring the particular sufferings of
groups whose experience of oppression is compounded by their location at
the intersections of specific sub-identities – whether it be class, race,
sexuality, or gender. Indeed, while Mahfouz’s use of patriarchal constructs
might have helped deflect the regime’s sexist slander of women and
broadened the movement’s appeal, it also pandered to patriarchal
sterotypes within the movement.3 Activists thus face a paradox. They
need unifying frames to create a widely appealing movement and to
establish empathy among soft line regime supporters (Moyer, 2001). Yet
these frames may reproduce oppressive constructions of subgroup identity and alienate important social allies in their common struggle with the existing order (Crenshaw, 1991; Davis, 2008).

Yet, movements also have to guard against constructing frames too narrowly. Overly narrow frames can push moderates closer to the hard liners. Indeed, both mobilization and delegitimization frames work best when they leave space for pro-regime moderates to defect to the opposition – when they separate the sinner from the sin. Not surprisingly, there are likely to be tensions between nonviolent civil resistance activists and other victims of political, social, and economic injustice.

*Laughtivism*  

Humor and the arts also carry powerful delegitimization and mobilization frames. Laughter, mockery, and artistic metaphor are quick, low cost ways to reveal the absurdity of regime justifications for power and make the movement more attractive to join. Few things will push a regime supporter into silence better than the fear of open mockery. Jokes thus play a big role in rhetorical coercion (Branagan, 2007; Kishtainy, 2009; Hiller, 1983; Roy, 2000).

Laughter also presents the regime with a persistent form of dilemma action. Using force to suppress a joke is difficult to justify – it looks weak and desperate. But allowing the laughter at the regime or its symbols to continue will encourage more people to get in on the joke, create feelings of opposition community, and further weaken regime legitimacy. Security forces often use strained – patently absurd – reasons to suppress the jesters. This further strains the credibility of regime rhetoric (Marović, 2011).

*Shared Identities and Moral Conversion*

Shared identities are vital resources in both delegitimization and mobilization frames. Any squad of (usually male) police officers, for example, consists of a range of individuals who sit at the intersection of multiple and often contradictory social positions with a corresponding jumble of normative expectations attached to each. “Policemen” are also likely to be “fathers,” “brothers,” “patriots,” “gentlemen,” or “neighbors.” By appealing to the patriotism, masculinity, or social obligations of the individual policeman, movements can shift the frame through which the
individual policeman makes his decision to follow orders. Welcoming messages from a compatriot, neighbor, or family member will not only lower the stakes the policeman faces if he breaks ranks (an important material effect), they also make possible a shift in the primary group with whom the officer identifies and force the individual into a difficult dilemma. As the identity shift occurs, new inter-subjective normative scripts rooted in other social contexts become operative and may come to replace the official script requiring obedience to official hierarchy.

Moral leadership can also play an important role in moral conversion. Nepstad details how the Catholic Church’s condemnation of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines placed Catholic soldiers in an unwinnable bind. Despite the very real threat of imprisonment and execution if they refused to obey orders, the church instructed that good Catholics could not achieve salvation if they attacked the peaceful nuns, priests, pregnant women, and children kneeling in peaceful protest before their tanks (Nepstad, 2011, p. 130).

While we should never underestimate the willingness and the ability of state security forces to brutalize friends, neighbors and relatives, genuine conversions can and do occur. Knowing this, regimes have often taken the countermeasure of engaging soldiers or police with a significant degree of identity separation from the protesters. Libya’s Muammar Qaddafi, Bahrain’s ruling Al-Khalifa family and the security forces of Bashar Assad have all used security forces with significant social distance from protesters to ensure obedience.

Rational material factors play a large role in security force defections. They usually face a stag hunt scenario in deciding whether to defect. Going home is often preferable to suppressing countrymen. The main deterrent is the high cost of getting caught. But if everyone defects, this cost is significantly reduced. Soldiers are more likely to defect if they have assurance that others are defecting too (Nepstad, 2011). Large numbers demonstrating is also a factor. Soldiers reasonably realize that they will lose if they have to beat everyone. Yet, since “beating everyone” means committing a “mortal sin,” or beating family, neighbors, and compatriots, shared identities make defections easier.

It is hard to look into the souls of regime supporters and claim moral conversion has taken place. There are rational explanations: Officers may cynically cross lines when their troops refuse to follow orders – a clear case of nonviolent coercion (Merriman, 2009, pp. 22–23). Or, regime supporters may make a rational, calculated bid to establish their influence and position
with the opposition should the regime fail. There are both genuine and
cynical reasons to assert, “I could not fire on my countrymen,” or “My
children were in the crowd” (Krebs & Jackson, 2007, p. 57). Regardless of
actual motives, defectors’ morally couched language in East Germany,
Philippines, Egypt, and dozens of other places reveals a successful exercise
of rhetorical coercion and the destruction of regime legitimacy. Delegiti-
mization frames made it impossible for regimes to find the language to
justify cooperation with their order. Unable to retain order through force,
these regimes acquiesced to a change in power.

CONCLUSION

Nonviolent civil resistance movements wage ideational battles. Prior to
action, there are feelings and ideas about identity and desire. Our focus on
social–psychological agents has thus taken us places where the rational
utility model is not equipped to tread. While useful in helping movement
organizers to overcome the free-rider and assurance problems, rational
utility maximization lacks a mechanism explaining how regime power is
legitimated and how it can be challenged ideationally.

Undemocratic regimes are vulnerable to ideational assault. Ideas can
make absurdities out of the frail arguments that regime supporters use to
justify power; and they can provide emotionally resonant reasons to take
insurgent actions against the regime. Movements gain impetus from how
group identities are framed. Dilemma actions work, not only because the
physical strength of the state is turned against its own interests, but because
the regime’s physical reaction to peaceful resistance signals its ideational
bankruptcy and hypocrisy. Intersectionalities provide us with a better
understanding of the advantages and dangers of maintaining movement
unity around broadly acceptable identity frames. We also see how humor
and the arts reduce regime justifications to absurdities and are thus exercises
in rhetorical coercion. Finally, we understand how regime supporters’
multiple identities can be used as resources in encouraging defection.

As the social movement growth cycle has shown, the rational choice
tradition has a lot to offer to the study of social movements. No movement
organizer would be wise to enter into nonviolent struggle without a firm
understanding of how their actions affect the material incentives structuring
the battlefield. Our goal here, however, is to ensure that the organizer
engages her opponents fully armed.
NOTES


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