Strategies are forged in a dance of conflict and cooperation between the parties to interdependent relations.

—Frances Fox Piven, Challenging Authority

Protestors have purposes as well as passions. They threaten, persuade, spend money, and make claims on others, and these targets respond with their own dizzying array of tactics. These interactions between protestors and their targets shape the world around us in profound ways. This book takes a new look at these strategic interactions.

After decades of productive inquiry into the antecedents of collective action, intramovement dynamics, and the consequences of movement activity, the time has come for an emphasis on the targets that generate such contention and collective effort to better understand why movements do what they do and why their interactions with other societal actors turn out as they do.

Targets are part of the definition of social movements. As theories of social movements emerged out of crowd theories in the 1960s, one of their new, distinguishing ingredients was attention to “the appropriate agencies of control” that activists targeted in their efforts to spur change (Smelser 1962, 17). There were always other players in serious discussions of social movements; there had to be targets against which protest could be directed. Crowds might aimlessly express emotions; social movements, in contrast, aim their anger at targets—although not always the expected targets. It is now a truism that protestors are complaining about something—and to someone.

Despite the central importance of targets to social movement activity, social movement theorists have not conceptualized movement targets as well as they could have. In the 1970s, the target was mostly assumed to be the state, especially in what came to be known as political process theory: Both
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the emergence of the movement and its influence were attributed directly to the structures of the state and the opportunities they provide or deny (McAdam 1982). Challengers battle members of the polity for admission, so that the state is both the arena and the central player making decisions about who can be citizens. Political process theory pointed to the importance of the “political environment” facing movements without always examining the full range of players that make up that environment.

As social movement theory developed, new perspectives offered alternative views of social movements’ interactions with other players in the environment, but none of them captured the strategic importance of targets. For example, game theory offers a compelling depiction of individuals’ choices and the recurrent trade-offs and dilemmas that these choices imply (Lichbach 1995), but the theory simplifies the social and political context of movement actors and fails to attend to the flows of interaction among a variety of players typical of a social movement or to explain why certain kinds of actors become the targets of a movement. John McCarthy’s and Mayer Zald’s (1977) theory of resource mobilization sought to explain how movement organizations emerge and thrive, depicting movements as interactive and strategic, but they focused—in their “partial theory”—on relatively friendly interactions with supporters rather than on conflictual engagements with opponents. Missing from this perspective were movements’ short- and long-term strategic interactions with their targets. The cultural approaches that emerged in the 1990s also examined movements from the inside: the frames and moral shocks that help them recruit new members; the collective identities that offer solidarity for those members; and the narratives they develop to encourage participants. Less attention was given to the trade-offs between the cultural meanings that aid the movement internally and those that help them influence the external targets of the movement. When emotions were added to cultural theories, they too were almost always applied to movement participants and almost never to the police, government officials, corporations, and other players.

These perspectives missed opportunities to flesh out our understanding of the targets of movements. Although resource mobilization theorists developed a framework of how movement organizations compete and mobilize donors and other resources, they did not simultaneously articulate how targets’ use of resources influence their responses to movement players and shape their long-term strategies for gaining political advantages. Cultural approaches articulated a perspective on the internal workings of culture, emotions, and frames, but they ignored how the cultural meanings equally affect their targets’ emotions and moral reactions. Movements, likewise, respond to the cultural expressions of their targets and often form cultural strategies that contest the symbols and discourse of their targets. The target
remains a hollow creature in the social movement literature—largely lacking in strategy, motivation, and cultural tools.

This is a book about protestors and their targets, which includes how they view each other, how they interact, and how their strategies unfold. Their strategic interactions unfold over long periods, across many arenas, even as the players themselves are frequently transformed. In these interactions we see a variety of gains and losses for all the players involved; in almost no case is there a single big battle that determines everything. Even in cases where it seems that compromises have been reached, new issues and grievances emerge around which players strategize. Contestation never ends.

Our understanding improves—in the social as in the natural sciences—when our models replace vague entities with more precise ones. Our theories, which we discuss in more detail later, have sensitized us to the importance of the political and social context in which movements operate, but perhaps in doing so we have failed to develop a vocabulary for talking about the specific activities and interactions that occur between contending players operating in that context. Throughout the Introduction, we argue that our scholarly inattention to targets is a product of a theoretical orientation around movements operating within and against structures, institutions, and fields. These perspectives have masked the interactions between players operating strategically in different arenas and stunted our ability as scholars to theorize the nature of these interactions. Refocusing our attention on interactions between movements, targets, and other players helps us to see inside the structures that have dominated social movement theories and gives us a clearer view of the strategies and actions that both movements and targets deploy.

We believe the time has come to place equal emphasis on the various players in contentious settings so as to focus more on their interactions: to specify what populates “the environment” for social movements. What expectations do the players start with? What patterns can we discern in their engagements? How do gains and losses emerge along the way? How do the players themselves change during and due to their engagements?

**Movements and Their Contexts**

Much contemporary theory conceptualizes movements as operating within strong contexts that are both the sources of a movement’s emergence and the forces against which the movement struggles to change. States and institutions figure heavily in these theories. Movement actors’ views of what is possible are constrained or enlivened by shifts in the states and institutional alignments. Scholars’ theorizing about these extramovement constraints have influenced how we think about what movements seek to accomplish and how they do it. We view these perspectives as problematic in that each
fails to take seriously the idea that contexts are actually made up of many different types of interacting, strategic players, any of which can become the target of a movement. We now describe these theoretical oversights in more detail and highlight how they have led us to overlook the interactions between movements and their targets.

Political Opportunities

In the political process model, political opportunities are thought to allow or prevent protestors from mobilizing and obtaining their goals (Tilly 1978; McAdam 1982; Kriesi et al. 1995; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996). Opportunities, such as a government scandal or a squabble among elites, are thought to open or close, stirring movements to action inasmuch as actors consider the reduced costs of mobilizing or the increased potential for success. Scholars portrayed protestors as maneuvering within these structures and taking advantage of opportunities when they appear. Political opportunities are exogenous to collective action and strategies, and social movements have little chance of influencing them (cf. Kurzman 1996).

Inasmuch as political process theorists conceived of political opportunities as resting mostly with the state, movements are largely seen as ineffectual players, dependent on the state to change the norms and rules of society. Poor and oppressed people in particular find it hard to mobilize by themselves. In resource mobilization variants, they need the money that sympathetic elites can provide; in more political versions they require some decline in state repression, whether as a result of fiscal crisis, moral sympathy, or disagreements among elites.3 Most of the time polities are stable orders that give little access to challengers. Only when those political structures become unstable do social movements have wiggle room to mobilize and generate any sort of influence.

This state-heavy conceptualization of movement behavior was, ironically, often quite devoid of the very actors that run governments, including the lawmakers, regulators, and state bureaucrats who implement policies (for exceptions, see Andrews 2001; King, Cornwall, and Dahlin 2005). The weakness of political process theory was in failing to characterize and even in masking the concrete interactions between these actors as well as the host of other players that move in and out of the state to accomplish their goals, including lobbyists, experts, and government contractors. By portraying political opportunities as fairly static structures, scholars failed to recognize the dynamic aspects of the political context (cf. Soule et al. 1999; McDonnell, King, and Soule 2015).

Conceptualizing states as made up of political opportunities led scholars to think of movement actors as highly reactive and one-dimensional. For
example, many studies erroneously portrayed a social movement organization as existing solely to pursue the passage of a single law, which is undoubtedly a simplification of a more complex strategy for social change. But theorizing movements as reactants to opening and closing opportunities unintentionally leads us to simplify their actions and portray them as less strategic than they really are.

Once we consider the full range of players involved in any change process, we recognize that “political opportunities” are quite dynamic. Opportunities are what players make of them. An action (say, by elites or states) typically causes a reaction from other players (such as protestors). If that reaction leaves the second player in a better position, political opportunity theorists go back and call the first player’s action an “opportunity” for the second player. This obviously underplays the causal impact of the second player’s reaction, which could instead have been dumb rather than smart, further disadvantaging the second player. This truncated form of analysis also results from an image of movements and their environments, with the latter either generating or closing off opportunities. In this way, even clear setbacks, such as police repression, can be called opportunities, because the players attacked can turn their setbacks into public sympathy or anger and outrage. But this does not mean that the setback was actually a positive opportunity all along in any objective sense.

A similar problem in the political opportunity structure perspective is that many political opportunities are not identified a priori by researchers in a deductive fashion. Rather, scholars examine the conditions associated with a change in movement behavior (such as the founding of new organizations) and then subsequently label these conditions as an opportunity. A political opportunity became any environmental condition associated with changes in movements’ actions. Even grievances were sometimes viewed, in a post hoc fashion, as opportunities, since movements would not appear without them (Smith and Jasper 2012).

Theoretical challenges mounted when scholars studied movements that do not operate in traditional political environments: movements that aim to change cultural understandings, often through art; those that attempt to establish alternative institutions; or those that promote religious views and conversions (Calhoun 1993; Goodwin and Jasper 2004). Attempts to fit the concept to different kinds of opportunities—exogenous changes in culture are just cultural opportunities—stretched the metaphor to the point of masking more than it reveals about certain contexts. Applying the language of political opportunity structure theory to corporations, for example, may unintentionally downplay the intentions of executives who run those companies or simplify the strategic intentions and actions of the corporation itself.
Corporations are vulnerable to the “disruptive power” of workers who can shut down key processes, such as dock and warehouse workers or truckers (Piven 2006, 38). Joseph Luders (2006) observes that targets weigh these disruption costs against the costs of concessions to movement demands. James Jasper and Jane Poulsen (1993) point out that in addition to these structural weaknesses, targets often create their own vulnerabilities, as occurs when they are caught in a lie. (Note that lying itself may give them an advantage, and it turns to a disadvantage only when discovered and revealed to the right audience.) The so-called paradox of state repression is similar: It may succeed in reducing protest, or it may instead inspire more, depending on how protestors (and bystanders) respond.4

Deconstructing political opportunities as interactions between players with sometimes conflicting goals and strategies helps us better understand the co-evolving patterns of protest and other movement tactics (Bosi 2008).5 We must observe what occurs in specific arenas and not simply use the language of political opportunity to encase those interactions and relationships in structure. Once we dive into the context more deeply and explain the interactions between various players within that context, the concept of political opportunity loses its utility and we need more precise theoretical language to describe why players behave as they do.

Institutions

Social movements seek to change institutions, and for that reason institutional theory has informed our understanding of how movements operate. The power of institutional theory is to highlight the connection between norms, roles, and other ideas, on the one hand, and what people actually do, on the other hand, to enforce the norms, express roles, and spread ideas (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Jepperson 1991). Inasmuch as social movements seek to change institutions, scholars have seen their function as challenging or reconciling norms and values that are contradictory or obsolete (Smelser 1962; Clemens 1997; Armstrong 2002).

Much contemporary institutional theory has conceived of institutions as exogenous to action (and interaction) and as providing a template or set of operating principles by which actors behave. John Meyer and Brian Rowan (1977) even defined institutions as myth and ceremony, providing a general blueprint for individuals, who are thought to satisfy cultural expectations rather than technical ones. In many ways, the new institutionalism is a return to more of a consensus model than that of “old institutionalists” such as Philip Selznick and Alvin Gouldner, who believed that organizations evolve out of contestation over basic values (Stinchcombe 1997, 2).
One of the challenges for institutional theory is to explain how institutional structures change, given their tendency to reproduce themselves. In some theories, social movements have been assigned this social function of inventing new institutions, a source of creativity and agency in otherwise structural models (Smelser 1962; Habermas 1987, 391–399; Luhmann 1996, 397–404; Touraine 1981). This model of institutional change has become common in organizational theory, which frequently posits that movement-like activity is the force that underlies the creation of new markets and organizational forms (Hargrave and Van de Ven 2006; Hiatt, Sine, and Tolbert 2009; King and Pearce 2010). Such theories know in advance what a movement is “really” about, even if its participants do not.

The problem of change is linked to the question of who brings it about. Martin Kitchener complains that institutional analysts “have generally provided accounts of a new logic and archetype being imposed, top-down, by powerful actors (e.g., state agencies) relatively quickly, and with little reported resistance to change” (2010, 128; emphasis in original). Although it may be true that powerful actors initiate change most of the time (given our circular definitions of power, this is probably true by definition), institutional theory potentially hides the efforts of other players. It becomes unclear what norms are (and especially whose they are) or how they are distinct from the institutions that supposedly carry and enforce them (Finnemore 1996). In the absence of a robust theory of change and its agents, institutionalist and other structural theories tend to exaggerate the coercive power of institutions and the agreement among those who participate in them. Institutions, as they have come to be defined, mask the boiling discontent and disagreement that often exist among those who contribute in some way to their reproduction. Recent efforts to explain change have emphasized the complexity of institutions, including the overlapping, sometimes conflicting “institutional logics” that inform identities and norms of appropriateness for domain-specific behavior (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2012). Players take advantage of the multiplicity of institutional norms to assert their own values and interests and create opportunities for institutional innovation (Kraatz and Block 2008).

Yet institutional logics are still seen as exogenous to interactions. Players “interpret and respond to pressures emanating from wider field-level logics” (Lee and Lounsbury 2015, 850). The institutional-logics perspective can obscure the central role of interactions between different players as the basis for the institutional pressures, substituting logics for behavior and using actions as an indicator or expression of a particular logic (Lee and Lounsbury 2015). Not surprisingly, the actions of targets themselves are nearly irrelevant in institutional theory, inasmuch as targets are not purposeful or strategic.
actors in their own right but rather representatives or instantiations of an institution. Their motives are nearly as inscrutable as those of their movement counterparts.

In taking a closer look at the strategic interactions between players that overlap multiple institutions, we may discover that the institutions are more temporary, situational, and malleable than previously thought. Although we certainly recognize that any sound analysis of movements and their targets takes into account the surrounding institutional forces and norms that shape interactions, we believe that focusing on the strategic interactions between the various players also helps us better understand the changing dynamics of the institutions themselves.

Movements and Their Dynamic Interactions with Targets

Highlighting movements’ targets requires that we think more carefully about the interactions between movement actors and other players in their environment, including those players that eventually turn into targets. Simply conceptualizing targets as part of a movement’s context—either as part of a political opportunity structure or as a reflection of the institution—obscures the ways in which their actions influence what movements do and how movements’ actions, in turn, shape targets.

Similarly, overly structural models do not account for changes of and within those structures, make structures appear more stable than they are, and do not allow dynamism in the relations between actors operating within structures, such as the state. Not only innovation but any sort of dynamism in structural models typically comes from the outside, from exogenous shocks and other factors that are not part of the structures. Even endogenous models of institutional change assume that change tends to occur when a particular structural vulnerability arises (e.g., Clemens and Cook 1999), discounting the possibility that structural vulnerabilities are the products of interactions between various players in an arena.

In short, theorizing about movements and change has been weighed down by the heavily structural language that obscures and discounts the importance of strategic interactions among different types of actors. We offer two theoretical perspectives that could advance the way we conceptualize movement-target interactions and therefore potentially breathe life into our understanding of movement targets: field theory and a theory of arenas.

Field Theory

Pierre Bourdieu developed the concept of a field as a form of social structure in which we could map individuals, based especially on the amount and
types of capital they bring to the field, the skills or habitus they demonstrate, or their relative success in the field. With this idea he could show the competition and latent conflict at the heart of institutions, for instance, academia, that are frequently viewed as consensual and cooperative.

The subjective element within fields is modest, as choices are made on the basis of a habitus typically internalized at a young age, but recently scholars have adapted Bourdieu’s theory of fields to conceptualize how players with varying levels of capital struggle for control over meaning and the “rules of the game” across a variety of domains (e.g., Goldstone 2004, 2015; Fligstein and McAdam 2012; King and Walker 2014). In these perspectives, fields are seen as relational and subject to bouts of stability and instability as players seek to exert influence and gain control over the field. In this view of fields, “social outcomes emerge from the multiple interactions of various actors and groups in highly non-linear fashion. Relationships move toward tipping points, coalitions build and expand, and security forces hold then suddenly divide and break” (Goldstone 2015, 236).

A common feature of these theories is that they seek to rethink institutions, including the state, as dynamic structures that transform and are transformed by interactions among actors. Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam, for example, reject the view of the state as unified, hegemonic, and capable of imposing stability on fields from the outside. Instead, they usefully argue, “stability is relative and even when achieved is the result of actors working very hard to reproduce their local social order” (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 7). Institutions, including corporations, are fields and therefore subject to contestation.

One benefit to seeing the world through the lens of field theory is to draw attention to players’ relative positions and the access their positions give them to different kinds of resources, which in turn create power imbalances as they interact. In this way, field theory offered an improvement over other perspectives, because it brought more specificity to the players themselves and suggested that institutions and structures were ever changing, dynamic, and continually subject to contestation. One downside to the field metaphor is that it draws attention away from the interaction itself, focusing instead on the aggregate of interactions as represented in players’ field positions (a problem similar to that of political opportunity structures). The elegance of field theory in representing players as distributed across unequal positions also tends to obscure the dynamic processes through which those positions are created and reinforced through interactions with other players.

At its worst, field theory relies on structural language and fuses several moving parts, sometimes to explain one of them but often on the assumption that they move together. In particular, as a structural model, it predicts what players will do based on their positions in the field or the habitus (or
social skills) that they have brought with them to the field. By examining individuals’ political careers, in and out of many organizations and movements, Olivier Fillieule (2010) shows that reducing players to mere positions in fields misrepresents the microlevel biographies of these players.

But at its best, field theory highlights the struggles between players as central to the creation, reproduction, and disruption of institutions, bringing greater attention to the strategic interactions between various types of players in this process. For instance, Sandra Levitsky and Jane Banaszak-Holl redefined institutions as fields in which “relations among a set of diverse actors all seeking to influence a common institution, whether that institution represents normative prescriptions for how social dynamics occur or is more rigidly embedded in legally sanctioned organizational forms” (2010, 11). In this view, actors are not heavily constrained in a top-down fashion by norms or rules, but instead we can see norms and rules as emerging out of the relations between actors. Similarly, Verta Taylor and Mayer Zald combine the concepts of institution and field, positing that the field is “driven by conflicting logics and beliefs about how practices and roles tied to the institution ought to be enacted” (2010, 307).

Moreover, field theory helps us reconceptualize structures, such as the state or a corporation, as a dynamic field of relations between different types of actors engaged in a struggle over meaning and control. Fields may vary between moments of stable cooperation and intense conflict and innovation, much as Donatella della Porta theorized that structural change often takes place during intense moments of “eventful protest” (2014, 17). Or as Mary-Hunter McDonnell, Brayden King, and Sarah Soule theorize, when we consider the strategic interactions between movements and players within a structure, we begin to see that political opportunities are “dynamic and responsive to social movement activities” (2015, 672). Movements are capable of creating their own opportunities inasmuch as they gain strategic advantages over their targets or develop cooperative relationships with former adversaries. If we wish to retain the most useful aspects of political opportunity theory then, as della Porta and McDonnell, King, and Soule suggest, we ought to refocus our attention on the ongoing interactions between movements and targets that lead to continual evolution in opportunities for influence.

Fligstein and McAdam (2012) contend that players are always trying to change structures and outcomes to their advantage, and we should never assume that we know when they can and cannot succeed. Quiet periods, like supposed equilibria in markets, are merely strategic stalemates until some player thinks up a new move or considers a strategic change that implies shifting to a new target. If used in this way, field theory has the potential to sensitize us to how targets move in and out of the vision of movements, de-
pending on the particular struggle over rules or norms taking place at the time. Targets, in this sense, are dynamically constructed out of the relations between actors in a field (Bartley and Child 2014). While the institutional tradition emphasizes the stability brought by common understandings and practices, the field tradition highlights conflict (although that conflict is often seen as occurring within shared understandings). Targets emerge out of this conflict. Shifting analytic focus to the interactions of different players—including movements and their targets—gives us a more complete view of what constitutes a field and how fields evolve.9

Players and Arenas

In an effort to synthesize cultural and structural traditions, a group of scholars have explored the vocabulary of players and arenas (Duyvendak and Jasper 2015; Jabola–Carolus et al. 2018; Jasper and Duyvendak 2015; Verhoeven and Duyvendak 2017). Because it is intended to be fully dynamic and interactional, Jan Willem Duyvendak and Olivier Filliéule refer to it as the “strategic interaction perspective” and “dispositionalist interactionism” (2015, 295).

Arenas are physical settings—true structures in the nonmetaphorical sense—with rules and expectations of action in which decisions can be made (or avoided) with something at stake. They shape action by offering seats, lighting, entrances and exits, raised areas, cameras, decorations, guards, recording devices, and archives.10 Players are individuals (simple players) and groups of individuals (compound players) with some (at least minimal) sense of identity and shared goals that they pursue in arenas through coordinated actions.

A language of players and arenas makes it clear who is interacting and where. Theories that incorporate the language of arenas attempt to address one weakness of structural models: the failure to combine agency and structure in ways that explain how structures change. Players can move from one arena to another, transform arenas, establish new arenas, but also act outside arenas. We can observe players and arenas, and the action of one in the other, without having to posit some mysterious additional level of reality—such as power, political opportunity structures, institutions, or fields—that we label social facts but that are actually our own analytic constructs (Latour 2005).

The strategic perspective embodied in arenas is parallel to recent discussions of assemblages or assemblies of heterogeneous raw materials, tools and other objects, places such as rooms and buildings, embodiments of symbols, and humans and other species. Sociologist Bruno Latour (e.g., 2005) uses his actor-network theory to criticize lazy conceptions of “the social” as
something stable enough to cause effects in some mysterious, invisible way; philosopher Gilles Deleuze makes an ontological argument in his assemblage theory, similarly questioning the status of a “whole” or a “totality” that cannot be analyzed into its component parts (e.g., Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 88). Along these lines, players-and-arenas theory insists on microlevel observations without relying on “social” institutions, fields, opportunity structures, and other creations of the social scientist.

Like field theory, the players-and-arenas language leads us to break down the state conceptually into its many component players and the various domains in which they interact, often clashing with one another (Duyvendak and Jasper 2015). Armies disintegrate into different units, often at odds with civilian police (Roxborough 2015). Police follow their own rules and mistakes, which are not always those of the politicians who govern them (della Porta and Atak 2015); they pay informants who have their own agendas and play for both sides (Cunningham and Soto-Carrión 2015). Local and national units of government are notoriously at odds (O’Brien and Li 2006; Verhoeven and Bröer 2015). The language of players moves beyond a dichotomized model in which two sides struggle and emphasizes that there are many of them, including subplayers that do not always agree over what actions and priorities that larger player should adopt (Favre 1990; Armstrong and Bernstein 2008).

The term “targets” covers many diverse players. An arenas perspective opens up the possibility of exploring targets that exist outside the state, players who are not merely open or closed, vulnerable or invulnerable, but who fight back. “We know relatively little,” observes Edward Walker, “about how non-state organizations engage in forms of activist repression ranging from soft forms such as PR and grassroots campaigning all the way to more extreme measures” (2014, 194).

Scholars are beginning to fill these gaps, especially for corporate players (Dobbin and Jung 2015; King and Soule 2007) and the media (Amenta, Caren, and Tierney 2015; Sobieraj 2011). In some interactions corporate targets concede to movement demands (King 2008), but other interactions lead to counterperformances seeking to display the targets’ morality or virtue (McDonnell and King 2013). Targets may even change their behavior in surprising ways to neutralize the influence of contentious interactions with movements. For example, Mary-Hunter McDonnell shows that corporations that have been frequent targets of activist boycotts become more likely to “voluntarily cooperate with [movements] to sponsor boycotts that protest the contested social practices of other companies and other entities” (2016, 53). McDonnell’s research indicates that targets’ repeated negative interactions with movements soften their stance toward those activists,
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even if only because they want to avoid the reputational damage that the attacks provoke.

Of course, not all actions occur in strategic arenas. Much action is preparatory for strategic interaction, as when movement actors hold meetings to plan a protest. Other actions are intended to influence internal members of a group, as when a protest movement holds a rally to bolster spirits of participants. And other actions have both strategic purposes and internal functions, leading to a greater level of strategic complexity. But one advantage of an arenas perspective is that it helps us analytically focus on the variety of purposes that actions have, including those taken by players that eventually become targets of a movement. In fact, as players move in and out of arenas, their actions may take on different meanings. In one arena an action may be quite clearly pointed at a target the player seeks to influence, whereas in an adjacent arena the same action may put the player squarely in the sights of another player and make it a target in its own right.

A protest rally may be intended to increase the commitment of members but also to influence politicians in advance of some decision in a legislative arena, as well as to reach media and—through them—bystander publics. But the same protest rally may actually make the movement a target of action by an ideologically conflicting movement and its associated media, as we have seen happen when far-right nationalists target protests sponsored by progressive students in an effort to draw attention to their nationalist cause and create a national media stir around freedom of speech on campus.

An arenas perspective also helps us see opportunities and contention between actors as, in fact, constituted by chains of strategic interactions among players and performances designed to elicit responses. Charles Tilly made the case that “contention involves making claims that bear on someone else’s interests” and that actions are dramatizations of these claims (2008, 5). Actors continually engage in performances, seeking to create understanding with like-minded players and to distinguish themselves from those with whom they disagree. Moreover, performances evolve as a result of contentious interactions with other players. Rather than think about performances as fixed, Tilly argues that players draw from a rich repertory of performances that they alter through trial and error. What players do depends on the situation and interaction at hand. For example, consider an actor facing a reputational crisis, whose past actions have been called into question by other players who seek to make an example of them. In a defensive situation like this, the player might resort to a number of performances that demonstrate the player’s innocence, draw attention away from the attack, potentially discredit the attackers, or highlight the actions’ positive characteristics. The chosen performance is itself a product of past
experiences (what we have learned how to do in the past), the nature of the attack, and the results of past interactions with the attackers (McDonnell and King 2013).

If one of the strengths of the players-and-arenas theory is to break down structures into sequences of interactions among players, the corresponding weakness is that it does not say much about other places in which action occurs or about metaphorical arenas such as public opinion. It is tempting to see opinions as a product in an arena, but the rules are amorphous and the places in which they are produced are numerous. It is not always clear how they add up to a single arena.

In addition, it is not always easy to distinguish players and arenas, especially for media and many components of states. Courts are easily analyzed as arenas, but judges and other court officials also pursue their interests as players and can easily be turned into targets by other players, as occurs when a federal judge is criticized by activists who disagree with a recent ruling. But the amorphousness of arena-player status reflects the reality of movement interactions and the evolving nature of arenas. As is true with field theory, a theory of arenas allows us to dynamically analyze these interactions and explain changes in arenas as a function of the interconnected, strategic actions taken by players.

To summarize, a healthy conversation about movements and targets would shift our analytic focus to the strategic interactions between various players in their arenas. Understanding those interactions would require greater sensitivity to the particularities of their situations, including how players understand their goals and interests and the various actions and performances that players are capable of using to accomplish them. Movements’ and targets’ interactions evolve over time, and one promising object of future study is to examine how and why these interactions change to produce a variety of strategic responses.

### Studying Movements and Their Targets

We begin this Introduction with the premise that social movement research would benefit from an increased focus on the targets of mobilization. The chapters of this book provide different views about how movements and their targets ought to be studied and suggest the kinds of questions we should ask as we examine movement targets. We do not claim that the book offers a comprehensive outline of how movement scholars ought to incorporate targets more fully into our analyses, but we hope its chapters are a step in the right direction.

Three broad topics of inquiry emerge in the book: (1) how movements choose particular targets, (2) the dynamics of movement and target interac-
tions, and (3) the outcomes of movement and target interactions. In the following sections, we address each of these topics and discuss them in the context of the chapters.

**How Movements Choose Targets**

In a struggle for political or social change, there are more potential targets than actual targets. Some players may, for a time, appear as inconsequential to a movement only to become seen at a later point as having important political consequences. Movements choose their targets selectively, sometimes ignoring the candidates that do the most harm and instead focusing on those that are vulnerable or that help them draw greater attention to their cause (McDonnell and King 2013; McDonnell, King, and Soule 2015). As Tim Bartley and Curtis Child argue, “The public identification of particular actors as responsible for injustice” is a product of a movement’s strategic intent and results in the social construction of what types of actors and behaviors deserve condemnation (2014, 654).

The selection of one type of target over another may reflect a more general strategy for social change. For example, environmentalists may switch from a legislative strategy to a more direct approach in which they appeal to the interests of businesses that produce excessive carbon (or they may decide to pursue a multifaceted strategy that encompasses legislation, lawsuits, and direct action). This strategic choice and shift in arena shape which players become targets and subsequently the types of tactics and discourse that activists may use; they also influence the movement’s own identity and hence recruitment.

Targeting is not always a calculated decision, and new targets can appear as a result of accidents, scandals, political controversies, or mere association with other movement targets (Molotch 1970; Jasper and Poulsen 1993). Legislators, businesses, or other elites can draw the attention of activists if they are associated with others who are previously targeted. For example, in the Red Scare, individuals became targets merely because they were associated through business relationships with people previously accused of being communist agitators (Pontikes, Negro, and Rao 2010). Analyzing the relationships among various types of players in an arena ought to help us better understand why certain players become targets and others are ignored.

Frances Fox Piven, in Chapter 1, provides a vivid example of how social movements interact with other key players in the highly contested arena of voting rights, thereby shifting the types of players that become targets. Social movements have long understood the need to secure voting rights to build power and influence in the United States, yet over the course of the country’s
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history certain groups have been systematically deprived of those rights. For that reason, voting rights have been at the center of the civil rights movement. The balance of power between civil rights activists and their political adversaries depended on the extension or repression of voting rights to Black Americans.

Piven illustrates how the movement’s targets changed over the course of the struggle for voting rights and depended greatly on the strategies the civil rights leaders chose to pursue. During the early 1960s, the targets were political leaders within the Democratic Party, like John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, whom civil rights leaders hoped to convince to promote voting rights legislation. But as electoral politics changed and southern Democrats switched to the Republican Party, the targets became state legislators who sought to redraw district boundaries and dilute Democratic—and by association, Black—votes. At various times business interests became targets as they sought to demobilize the Black voting bloc and push policies that took entitlements away from the poor. Piven’s story demonstrates that targets shift as a movement’s strategy changes and as loyalties and alliances within the political arena change.

In Chapter 2, Katrin Uba takes a unique approach to an important question in social movement research: When does protest not materialize around a potential target? She recognizes that not all potential targets become actual targets and offers a case in which activists chose to target certain actors but not others: protests around Swedish school closures. Although not nearly as politicized as closures in the United States, Swedish school closures are still quite contentious in that they require families to move their children to new schools. Despite being controversial, closures do not always result in protest. Uba finds that schools are more likely to become the target of protest if the closure is partial, which increases the perceived deprivation among members of the school who feel they are losing valued services. Schools are less likely to become targets if there is a broad coalition supporting the closure and when other options for “exit” exist. She shows that schools are most likely to become targets of protest when they remain the only option on which neighborhood families depend and exit is not possible.

Uba’s analysis demonstrates the importance of considering the relations between other players and other strategic options that movements have when considering whether an organization becomes a target. As Bartley and Child (2014) have argued, not all potential targets become targets, so we must examine the various other options for action that movement participants have, including exiting from the contentious situation entirely. If protest never occurs, potential targets slide into obscurity without becoming the focus of conflict. Target choice, of course, ultimately shapes the movement as much
as (or maybe even more than) the target itself, which makes this initial selection quite important for the trajectory and fate of a social movement.

**Movement-Target Dynamics**

As movement players and their targets interact, they change one another. Once movement players select a target and begin interacting with it, the movement itself may begin to adapt its strategies, tactical repertory, and perhaps even its identity (Bob 2012; Fetner 2008; McDonnell 2015). Interactions imply actions and responses. An activist group may decide to protest outside a rally of a sitting president, which may in turn elicit a response from the president. The president’s reaction may further inflame the activists, especially if the president tries to denigrate their behavior or demonize them in some way. The activists likely respond with further protests or other tactics, such as online trolling, to damage the president’s reputation and draw attention to their cause. This may continue for some time, creating greater polarization between the president, the president’s supporters, and the activist agitators.

Targets may instead choose to ignore movement activists, in which case activists will seek other tactics that they believe will be more effective at drawing the target into an interaction. Targets may also seek to negotiate with a social movement and potentially concede to particular demands (King 2008). Or a target may seek other ways to neutralize the movement’s tactical influence (McDonnell and King 2013). Each target response requires movement actors to respond in turn and potentially to draw on a different set of tactics than they used in the past. The possibilities of action/reaction are numerous and do not always fit into the stylized conceptual boxes that social movement scholars have created to understand movement tactics.

By focusing more explicitly on the interactions between movements and their targets, we believe there is great potential to understand why and how movements and targets act as they do and how social movements contribute to social and political change. Although past research on tactical innovation (McAdam 1983), collective action frames and cycles of protest (Snow and Benford 1992), and tactical diffusion (Soule 1997) all touch on the interactions between movements and targets, targets are usually of secondary concern. Moreover, the variety of ways in which targets influence internal dynamics of social movements has been largely ignored. It is as if our theories perceive targets as outside the landscape in which movements form and evolve.

In Chapter 3, Gay Seidman shows how targeting new types of actors can change the conditions of mobilization and coalition formation within
movements. She examines urban movements in postcolonial cities, where distinctions between poor and elite are amplified by a lack of citizenship and social rights. She tracks the evolution of these urban movements from those focused explicitly on pro-democratization to new protests in which middle-class citizens are equally likely to participate and the focus of which is highly localized.

In the past, the targets of urban protest movements in postcolonial cities were often the ruling elites—descendants of colonial landholders and power holders in democratic institutions—whereas increasingly protestors target local administrators who promote market liberalization policies such as state retrenchment and currency devaluation. Liberalization policies have wreaked havoc on urban infrastructure, further debilitating the well-being of the poor but also creating dissatisfaction among middle-class constituents who depend on basic services such as water or electricity.

Seidman is interested in the potential for broad urban movements that unite the middle class and the poor. She notes recent examples of protests centered around the failure of local municipalities to provide basic services. These protests are far less macro-oriented than previous protest movements in postcolonial countries, but Seidman believes that in shifting to local, bureaucratic targets, there is still potential to create a real democratic movement. The localization of movement targets allows collective action that cuts across economic classes, political parties, or other traditional group boundaries. She illustrates that targeting has a direct impact, for better or worse, on the ability of protestors to form cohesive movements among otherwise disconnected groups.

Kim Voss and Pablo Gastón, in Chapter 4, offer a similar view of how shifts in movement targets change the internal dynamics of a movement. Examining the relationship between businesses and unions, they argue that American unions faced internal strategic conflict inasmuch as they transformed their repertoires of contention to keep pace with changes in their corporate targets and the evolving political landscape. In previous eras, when manufacturing was dominant, unions organized primarily in the workplace, using tactics like strikes to wield collective power. But as service jobs replaced manufacturing jobs, unions had to change their strategy, increasingly relying on externally focused anticorporate campaigns. This strategic shift moved unions closer to other social movements, such as the human rights movement, in creating coalitions with other social justice activists and using discursive tactics to build public support for their causes.

As unions’ strategies have become more community oriented, their targets have expanded to include local city and state governments, which have been at the center of right-to-work and other controversial employment laws. External campaigns, of course, require different skills and deemphasize
workplace organizing and the accompanying efforts toward union democ-
ratization. Thus, one negative consequence of the externalization of union
tactics has been a deemphasis on democratic decision-making as an ideal.
One of Voss and Gastón’s insights is that the transformation of targets can
create internal, cultural tensions in movements that formed around a spe-
cific tactical repertoire. If movement participants come to associate the
movement with a particular style or repertoire of contention, changes in
tactics to keep up with the targets’ own development may lead to decreased
participation and weaken the movement’s ability to mobilize in the future.
This trend is evident in the labor movement.

Voss and Gastón conclude that when targets are vulnerable to tactics that
require direct action by movement participants, the movements are more
democratic, but when targets are more vulnerable to tactics that do not re-
quire direct action, movements will become less democratic and face inter-
Rnal struggles.

In Chapter 5, Kenneth Andrews and Sarah Gaby delve into the episodic
and disjointed nature of social movements. Rather than think of movements
as continuous, linear flows of collective action, they argue that movements
occur episodically and are far more locally oriented than we think. Move-
ment targets are also episodic; even in the same communities, local move-
ment leaders may shift their focus considerably, initially targeting a local
business, switching to a municipality, and then targeting a political party.

Andrews and Gaby’s episodic analysis allows us to explore the dynamic
interactions between movements, targets, and other actors in a delimited
time period. Episodes combine multiple events and are driven by the strate-
gic interactions of the various players involved in a conflict. Narrowing in
on a particular episode allows us to specify the particular historical, politi-
cal, and social context that drives the particular interactions.

Why do episodes begin and eventually end? This is the central question
that motivates a study of episodes rather than a broader analysis of a move-
ment’s life course. Consider the primary example offered in the chapter: epi-
isodes of civil rights demonstrations in Durham, North Carolina, in the early
1960s. Episodes typically began with the introduction of a new tactic by civil
rights leaders (e.g., sit-ins at lunch counters), accompanied by shifting to a
new target, followed by ongoing interactions between the activists and the
target, possibly negotiations, and ultimately a resolution of some sort. The
conclusion of one episode typically feeds into another by shaping the strate-
gic context in which targets and movement actors make future decisions.

These chapters all demonstrate that interactions between movements
and targets may transform the political and social environments in which
they operate. Focusing on the dynamic interactions between movements and
targets reveals that environments are not static or completely exogenous;
rather, movements play a role in shaping their environment, not least because they can provoke targets to respond (McDonnell, King, and Soule 2015). Actions and responses between targets and movements transform the very environment and create the conditions for future mobilization.