

Culture, Networks, and Interaction in Social Movement Publics

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At this point, it has become taken for granted that “networks matter” in social movement. Early work by David Snow, Doug McAdam, Roger Gould, Mario Diani and others made the structuralist argument that social ties often matter more for mobilization than attitudes or ideologies. A wide range of scholars have used networks methodologies to examine dynamics related to recruitment, solidarity-building, diffusion, brokerage, and alliance-making. Charles Tilly’s deeply relational ontology has shaped the sensibilities of generations of social movement scholars, whether or not they use specific network methodologies in their work.

The more challenging question at this time is not whether network matter, but rather how to conceptualize and study the complex layers of network interactions involved in social movement activity. We need to examine (1) the multiple and overlapping relations of that constitute movement milieus; (2) the ways those relations are composed and recomposed through processes of interpretation and discourse; and (3) the ways in which those ties are performed and enacted in interaction settings. My work has focused on this interface between networks, culture and interaction, certainly influenced by my dialogue and collaboration with Harrison White.

Early on in the development of network analysis, Harrison White posed a pivotal question: what do we mean by a “type of tie”? This deceptively simple question opens the door into a host of complex processes which lead us quickly into an engagement with culture and interaction. When we talk about the relations commonly examined by network analysts – such as friendship, respect, advice, collaboration, or opposition – this begs the question of the meanings and interpretations associated with such ties – for example, what in fact constitutes friendship? What historical streams of discourse (as Bakhtin would say) have converged to inform our local understanding of what a friend is or isn’t? How might the ambiguity or multivalence of those meanings enhance or impede the process of friendship-building? Moreover, how are those streams of discourse appropriated, deployed, perhaps transformed by the local speakers? And since friendship may be only one out of multiple ties that I share with you, how do I signal performatively, within a given interaction setting, that now I’m speaking *as a friend* as opposed to a client, co-worker, supplicant, challenger or authority? How do I switch between the multiple ties that may compose our relationship, while moving within and between social settings (Mische and White 1998; Mische 2003)? Paul McLean (1998, 2007) has recently studied these discursive processes as constitutive of patronage relation in Renaissance Florence, and they are central to White’s (1992, 1995, 2008) recent work on language and narrative.

In my own work, I’ve addressed these processes by studying the communication dynamics among multiply-tied Brazilian youth activists, as they construct different kinds of publics. My understanding of publics can be seen as fusing elements of White’s appropriation of

Goffman with a political analysis of civic relations, drawn from Habermas, Gramsci, Dewey, and Machiavelli. White builds on Goffman's (1963, 1967, 1974, 1981) work on interaction in public spaces by describing how participants in publics become decoupled from other identities and involvements, in bubble-like interaction that alters the experience of time. Within a public, participants experience a momentary sense of connectedness due to the suspension of surrounding ties. "The social network of the public is perceived as fully connected, because other network-domains and their particular histories are suppressed. Essential to its mechanism is a decoupling of times, whereby time in public is always a continuing present time, an historic present" (White 1995, p. 1054).

I argue that political communication is facilitated when actors can carve out such spaces "in between," that is, not dominated by single identities or membership blocks, but positioned at the intersections of multiple identities, projects, and forms of political intervention. I define such publics as *interstitial spaces in which actors temporarily suspend at least some aspects of their identities and involvements in order to generate the possibility of provisionally equalized and synchronized relationships* (Mische 2007). Such spaces buffer relations between individuals and collectivities that otherwise may be engaged in particularistic and contending projects. They often draw upon ambiguity and ritual in order to find points of connection that generate productive relationships and new forms of joint action.

Such publics are characterized by particular styles of communication that both constitute and mediate the relations within them. Recently, students of political culture have begun to focus attention not just on cultural representations (whether understood as symbols, codes, schemas, or narratives), but rather on the ways in which these are filtered through what Goffman calls the performative "footings" of settings of interaction (Goffman 1959, 1974; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). Styles represent shared assumptions about "what talk is for," that is, the appropriate footing within a given conversational setting.

I build upon their discussion, but add a stronger relational and pragmatic component. *Communicative styles develop out of the social and cultural challenges of local configurations of relations.* We can refer to these as "styles" because they are patterned and recognizable, to participants as well as to relevant sets of non-participants. Moreover, they are to some degree *mobile* and *transposable*. While formed in response to the problems and possibilities of particular institutional settings (White 1994, 2003), they can be carried outside of those settings and put to use elsewhere, to good or ill effect depending on the receptivity of the new relational context. This mobility is possible because styles have a habitual element, born of particular institutional configurations. However, their good exercise is also a *skill* that can be deployed more or less effectively by individuals and adapted to new settings as they arise.

To analyze the role of styles in the construction of publics, we can usefully distinguish between several component elements:

Institutional contexts: Styles of communication within publics are shaped by the institutional contexts that house and support them, even though they are not completely determined by those contexts. For example, political parties are dominated by the logic of the pursuit and contestation of state power, even though particular parties may pursue that power in different ways. This differs in fundamental ways from the religious pursuit of transcendental union or redemption, although different religious groups may conceive of this in more or less other-worldly terms (and may be more or less sympathetic with particular partisan orientations). Both of these differ from professional associations, which are concerned with training, orienting, and legitimating the actions of individuals within the world of work. These institutional logics inform the styles of communication that predominate in publics, steering them towards different kinds of collaboration and competition, or relations between ideas and actions.

Relational composition: In addition to institutional logics, styles are also shaped by the relational composition of publics, that is, by negotiation between the multiple forms of identity and involvement potentially in play within particular encounters. Institutional milieus tend to be composed of individuals whose affiliations cluster in characteristic ways. Any given organization or group will have what I call an *affiliation profile*, that is, an array of affiliations in other groups that are typically held by their members. For example, in the mid 1990's, almost all Brazilian student movement leaders belonged to political parties or factions, and some also participated in religious, community, or pre-professional organizations. Most Catholic youth activists were extremely involved in community-based popular movements, with some partisan, student, labor, and NGO involvement. On other hand, very few leaders in business student groups had any partisan, religious, or community involvement. These overlapping sectoral identities (and their associated logics and styles) in turn become resources for communication within particular settings, although they can also clash with and undermine each other. Communicative styles develop from the ways that actors wrestle with the problems and possibilities posed by particular institutional intersections.

Skilled performances: While institutional context and relational composition together compose the structural underpinnings of styles, their effectiveness depends on how they are performed in public encounters. Such encounters pose relational challenges for multiply affiliated actors. Which of their identities and projects can be expressed, and which have to be backgrounded or suppressed? What can and cannot be said in different kinds of movement forums, or in response to particular types of audiences? Conversational footings are fluid, shifting and manipulable through what Goffman calls “keying” practices, in which actors signal – semantically, gesturally, grammatically – which frame or definition of the situation is being invoked in a given instance. As McLean (1998, 2007) notes, such keying processes have a network dimension, in that what are often being “keyed” are specific relations between actors – i.e., friendship ties, shared memberships, relations of deference, familiarity, or respect. These performances have a ritual as well as an instrumental component; ties must be strategically represented as well as solidaristically affirmed.

The styles that characterize particular publics do not necessarily involve one all-encompassing communicative footing. As activists engage in discussion and relation-building, they can move back and forth between a variety of different footings, which I call *modes of communication*. Some modes are more collaborative while others are more competitive; some are oriented toward elaborating ideas, while others push toward deliberation over actions. What I am calling a “style” refers to the patterned ways in which actors in particular institutional contexts combine, highlight, suppress, or move between these different communicative modes.

To describe these modes, I draw upon four competing models of political action that are often seen as contradictory or incommensurable. I refer to these as *exploratory dialogue*, *discursive positioning*, *reflective problem-solving* and *tactical maneuver*. These modes are summarized in Table 1 (below). At the risk of oversimplification of the work of the theorists involved, we can see these footings as finding theoretical justification in the work of Habermas, Gramsci, Dewey, and Machiavelli, respectively. While these distilled sketches do not do justice to the richness of the theorists’ writings, they do correspond to some of the main points of reference that have entered into what we might call “popular political theory,” especially as they have informed the models of action appropriated by political actors, in Brazil and elsewhere.

I argue that these are not just contending theoretical models, but rather correspond to distinct practices of skilled political communication that appear in different contexts and combinations. We can think of them as ideal types of communication that are discernible in varying degrees within empirical social contexts. Rather than concerning ourselves with choosing which one is “right” or “best,” we should pay attention to the manner in which groups and individuals move between these modes in specific settings of interaction.

These four modes also constitute different kinds of skilled leadership (Fligstein 2001), which are important to the construction of certain kinds of publics. That is, they can each help to enable productive communication among heterogeneous actors, through the temporary suspension of some aspects of identities and relations. Skilled leaders can variously play up or down the competitive or collaborative dimension of relationships, as well as the focus on ideas as opposed to action. The “products” of such skilled communication vary according to the mode in play. Depending on orientations toward exploratory dialogue, discursive positioning, reflective problem solving, or tactical maneuver, communication in such publics may result in new understandings, cultural reforms, practical solutions or provisional alliances – all important dimensions of political interaction. On the other hand, the *unskilled* or low quality use of these modes of action may contribute to communicative tension or breakdown: endlessly circulating discussions, rigid posturing, narrow pragmatism, or devious manipulation.

I take this argument one step further and argue that movement between modes of communication is in turn tied to the *relative salience* of different institutional affiliations. The selective identity work by which actors foreground and background some aspects of their identities and relations favors the activation of some modes of communication over others. For

example, the salience of partisan identities or other contentious relationships within a setting may favor enactment of the more competitive modes of discursive positioning and tactical maneuver, depending on whether the footing tends toward ideas or action. Moreover, institutions that understand their identities in collaborative terms – for example, some kinds of religious, cultural, or professional associations – may invoke exploratory dialogue and reflective problem-solving. Actors may switch between modes as different identities and relations gain or lose salience within a given interaction. In this way, performative choices regarding modes of communications (and sometimes struggles or movement between modes) represent responses to the relational challenges posed by particular institutional intersections.

Table 1: Four modes of skilled political communication

	Collaboration	Competition
Ideas	<p>EXPLORATORY DIALOGUE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HABERMAS: <i>public sphere</i> as realm of rational-critical discussion over shared values • communication as mutual learning, search for understanding • debate as persuasion based on shared value claims, collective identity and purpose • building a common lifeworld and projects of human emancipation • suspension of instrumental purposes to focus on collective values • <i>skilled leaders as consensus-builders in dialogue over common good</i> 	<p>DISCURSIVE POSITIONING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GRAMSCI: <i>civil society</i> as terrain of power and struggle between contending classes • communication as ideological dispute in the “field of ideas” • debate as a “war of position”; trenches and breaches • building hegemonies and counter-hegemonies; historical “blocs” • articulation of new “subjects” of political struggles for social reform • <i>skilled leaders as “organic intellectuals” proposing moral and intellectual reforms</i>
Actions	<p>REFLECTIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DEWEY: <i>democratic community</i> as locus of attention and improvement • communication as reflective deliberation about shared problems • debate as evaluation of past practices and experimental consideration of future • building democratic relationships and a scientific approach to social problems • intertwining ends and means, value and purpose • <i>skilled leaders as facilitators of joint learning and problem-solving</i> 	<p>TACTICAL MANEUVER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MACHIAVELLI: <i>the “city”</i> as an arena of struggle over power, position, and resources • communication as negotiation, bargaining, and discursive maneuver • debate as manipulation of information and rhetoric • building opportunistic relationships and positions of control • distinction between tactic and strategy, ends and means • <i>skilled leaders as energetic, “virtuous” citizens able to command and control</i>

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