UNDERSTANDING ACTIVISTS' POLITICAL THEORIES: A HERMENEUTIC METHODOLOGY FOR FRAME ANALYSIS

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Abstract

At the heart of social movements lie structures of beliefs and values that guide critical action and aid activists' understandings. These are worthy of interrogation, not least because they contain points of articulation with ideational formations found in both mainstream politics and academia. They offer an alternative view of society, economy and polity that is grounded in protagonists' experience and struggle. However, the ideational content of social movements is often obscured by a focus on particular, immediate goals; by their orientation to certain forms of action; and by the mediated, simplified nature of their communication. Additionally, recent social movements display a tendency to coalitional action, bringing a diverse set of political understandings in concert on highly specific campaigns.

This conceptual paper seeks an approach to identifying the messages within social movements that remains sensitive to their complexity, dynamism and heterogeneity. Through a critique of the concept of 'interpretative frames' as developed in social movement studies, I describe the novel concept 'orientational frame'. In contrast to social movement scholars' tendency to focus on instrumental claim-making by movement organisations, I emphasise deeply held, relatively stable sets of ideas that allow activists to justify contentious political action. Through an engagement with Michael Freeden's morphological approach to understanding ideologies I attempt to draw frame analysis away from the positivistic attempt to delineate general processes into a hermeneutic endeavour more suitable to understanding the context dependent, specifically realised ideas of particular social movements.

Through discursive activity and political protest, social movement activists develop structures of belief that critique the status quo, offer solutions to identified problems and justify political action to achieve change. Commentary found in both mainstream media and some academic analyses tends to oversimplify these belief structures by associating broad social movements with temporary demands or specific forms of protest activity. However, neither demands nor actions can be fully understood without reference to the wider belief structures within which those elements are embedded. Furthermore, recent social movements have demonstrated a high degree of heterogeneity in participants' political worldviews. Among these movements a positive evaluation of diversity has come to the fore, rivalling traditional calls for unity. This is evident from the Zapatista's slogan 'one no, many yeses'; the Social Forums' opposition to the '*pensée unique'*, or singular, unified idea; and the stable alliance of the Stop the War Coalition, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the Muslim Association of Britain in the British anti-war movement. Internal diversity makes it both more difficult and more important to understand belief structures that underlie political demands. For instance, the speed and scale with which anti-war movements developed from 2002-2005 might be profitably interpreted through reference to the wide range of different political positions from which it made sense to oppose the invasion of Iraq.

Since the mid-1980s social movement scholars have made use of Ervin Goffman's conceptualisation of interpretative frames in the attempt to highlight the importance of critical beliefs to supplement to the previously dominant resource-focused approaches. This body of theory forms a plausible starting point in attempting to unpick the various sets of beliefs and values utilised by activists. This paper offers methodological and conceptual critiques of the framing approach to argue that substantial reconceptualisation is required to enable the interpretation of the ideas operating in contemporary, heterogeneous social movements. It is for this reason that I introduce a novel conception, using the label 'orientational frames' to distinguish it from previous concepts of the framing perspective. Frames are 'orientational' in a number of senses: they relate to people's basic beliefs and attitudes; they offer direction since they are inherently action-focused; and they allow actors to understand their own position relative to others. I distinguish orientational frames from other frame concepts found in the social movement literature through engagement with Michael Freeden's work on ideologies. The latter further enables the development of an hermeneutic methodology, useful in delineating particular orientational frames in the context of contemporary collective action.

Interpretive Frames in Social Movements

A recent overview of the relevant literature defines frames as:

> collective patterns of interpretation with which certain definitions of problems, causal attributions, demands, justifications and value-orientations are brought together in a more or less consistent framework
> for the purpose of explaining facts, substantiating criticism and legitimating claims. (Rucht and Neidhardt 2002: 11)

This draws our attention to three important elements. First, frames are often conceived of as an entity belonging to the collective level. This, however, raises conceptual difficulties that are explored shortly. Second, frames have a range of content consisting of a

structured set of beliefs and values. This, however, is typically underplayed in favour of the third element of frame analysis; that is, frames are employed strategically by individual or collective agents to fulfil a variety of social movement tasks.

Strategic Framing

The interpretative frame is considered to be a facet of all social life. However, frames have gained particular attention in relation to social movements because the latter typically make claims about the world and attempt to persuade others of their veracity. Gamson describes the interpretative frame, as particularly found in social movements, as a 'collective action frame'. I will follow this convention, reserving 'interpretative frame' to discuss the individual level, cognitive features of frames. The collective action frame requires three components: a defined injustice couched in emotion-laden terms; an analysis of the agency to create change; and an identity component defining both the 'we' of interested people, and a 'they' who hold opposing values. (Gamson 1992: 7-8)

The bulk of social movement frame analyses have, in either historical or contemporary context, examined the creation of frames by social movement organisations (SMOs). (Polletta 1997: 439) Here it is the process of framing, rather than the content of the frame, on which analysis is focused. The SMO is considered to be a conscious agent of framing; demonstrating varying degrees of skill in manipulating the presentation of particular issues in order to bring bystanders to their view, make opponents' positions appear illegitimate and ultimately force policy change. Since SMOs need constantly to attract new members, "social movements cannot exist in the long term without the promotion of convincing movement-specific frames." (Rucht and Neidhardt 2002: 11) Snow *et al.* influentially outlined four processes of 'frame alignment': bridging, amplification, extension and transformation (Snow *et al*. 1986). Each involves the reconstruction of collective action frames on the basis of expectations about the effect this would have on the general public. Because interpretative frames are conceived as having an existence in individual cognition, each of these processes entails an SMO seeking a degree of fit between the collective action frames they portray and the interpretative frames already used by bystanders to make sense of the world. Through such processes, under certain conditions, SMOs gain support, wider membership or donations of resources.

Snow and Benford take their work on frame alignment further by attempting to offer an explanation of how broader social forces interact with individuals' motivations to participate. They thereby attempt to offer a theory that bridges the micro and macro levels of analysis. They develop the concept of 'master frames', which "are to movement-specific collective action frames as paradigms are to finely tuned theories." (Snow and Benford 1992: 138) The explanatory potential of the master frame is laid out in connection with Sidney Tarrow's work on cycles of protest. Tarrow, among others, found that protest movements occur clustered through time, and spread geographically from the 'epicentre' of protest. Snow and Benford suggested that this could be explained by the development of a particular master frame developed by 'early riser' movements. The development of the master frame (of which 'civil rights' is perhaps the most solidly applied example) offers a cultural tool which could then subsequently be used in different contexts by different social movements. The strategy here lies in being able to utilise broadly agreed cultural values in order to transcend current practices (Tarrow 1998).

There are two clarifications of the idea of strategic alignment processes that are illustrative, before I examine their conceptual foundations in social psychology.

First, groups that do not choose to promote their interpretations with some awareness of bystanders' frames are unlikely to grow. This understanding is quite common among social movement activists. Consequently those groups that do not engage in frame alignment processes are rare. However, participants in some groups may be less interested in gaining support, and more interested in targeting their opponents in a forceful, direct manner. A stark example would be animal rights activists who harass and assault individuals involved in vivisection. The way one is understood to be acting may be less important to participants, than the concrete results of their actions. Alignment processes do not, therefore, seem to be a ubiquitous feature of social movement activities, merely a common one. Furthermore, because part of the content of a collective action frame is seen to be a conception of agency ('how we can change the world') the content of the frame itself is likely to determine to what degree a movement group aims at aligning its collective action frame with outsiders.

The second clarification is based on the fact that a movement is "a field of actors, not a unified entity" (Gamson and Meyer 1996: 283-4). While we might accept that consensus on a collective action frame exists within a particular organisation, this cannot be assumed to be representative of a movement as a whole since movements are typically made up of a plurality of organisations. The individual bystander may be expected, therefore, to come across a range of collective action frames within a single movement. This is clearly the case with the movements contesting globalisation (Welsh and Chesters 2001). Thus, strategic framing by SMOs is, at best, only part of the story of alignment between collective action frames and individual's understandings and we cannot expect examination of strategic framing to give us access to the full range of political beliefs and values within the movement. To the extent that we are interested in the ideational basis of individuals' decisions to participate in a social movement we therefore need a supplementary or alternative approach.

The Social-Psychological Foundation of Interpretative Frames

The interpretative frame was first defined for application to social movements, using a concept borrowed by Snow *et al*. from Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis*. Quoting Goffman they explain frames as: "'schemata of interpretation' that enable individuals 'to locate, perceive, identify, and label' occurrences within their life space and the world at large." (Snow *et al*. 1986: 464; Goffman 1974) The language of 'schemata' and the related concept of 'scripts' remain central to understanding cognition in social psychology where knowledge structures are recognised as helping actors decide on appropriate behaviour in novel situations. Schemata may cover a myriad of topics from the stereotyping of ethnic minorities to the mundane activities of our everyday lives (Baron and Byrne 2003: 80-82). The interpretative frame built on this literature is, therefore, presented as a cognitive shortcut utilised by the individual to order their perceptions of the world (Johnston 1995: 235-7). Rather than understanding an object or event through reconstruction from its component parts, we actually assign a satisfactory definition to a complex whole that, in turn, enables us to understand the component parts as having an identifiable meaning; "perceptive data are 'grouped' together under the heading of one subsuming category, a larger 'frame' which provides them with a

recognizable structure and meaning." (Donati 1992: 140-1) Metaphorically, frames are described as having two functions analogous to a picture frame or a scaffold. That is, on one hand, the frame draws a boundary around what is important, allowing the individual to focus on 'relevant' detail. On the other hand, the frame offers a basic structure within which additional information may be located. (Creed, Langstraat and Scully 2002: 34-5; Davies 2002: 270-1)

There are dangers, however, in the sociologist or political scientist taking too readily from the psychologist. For the student of social movements the cognitive level frame is epistemologically and methodologically troublesome. An individual interpretative frame (schema) is, by definition, privy only to the individual. Even for them the effects are indirect, rather than resulting from conscious knowledge. One cannot become, as it were, part of that individual to learn the frame as one can (with some methodological caveats) become part of an organisation that shares a collective action frame. The individual interpretative frame is unknowable because at any time some parts are latent and others prominent. As Thomas Scheff comments in a critique of a common misunderstanding of Goffman's work, "The difficulty of measuring latent frames could partially explain the gradual theoretical shift toward a conceptualization of frames as being more actively adopted and manufactured." (Scheff 2005) While not explicitly oriented towards social movement theory this quotation clearly points out the direction such scholarship has taken. The active process of strategic framing is relatively easy to perceive as it is momentarily ossified in movements' textual representations. Yet here we only perceive those aspects of the frame that are, for particular purposes, intentionally put to the fore. While this is certainly valuable data we must reject the notion that it accurately reflects the full set of beliefs of either individuals or groups.

The ambition of much scholarship in framing approach to social movements is to delineate important processes that mediate predictably between political culture, SMOs and individual behaviour. Since frames are identified at the collective level but conceived as causally effective at the individual level such work introduces a problematic dualism. This, firstly, highlights confusion over agency. The issues framed by an SMO are effective if they appeal to belief structures already held by a set of bystanders. Notions of frame alignment assume a rather limited level of agency for the bystander with respect to interpretative frames. Yet, simultaneously, the members of the SMO ('adherents') have chosen to present their issues in a particular way, assuming a wide degree of control over their collective action frames. At some point the bystander becomes a constituent and, on this model, will gain control over their interpretative framing. This problem highlights the deficiency of the bystander-adherent distinction when faced with the rapidly changing field in which social movements operate and the many shades of grey that may colour an individual's assessment of their 'membership' of a movement. This raises a secondly, and more crucial question, as to the degree to which any movement activists, including those in well-resourced SMOs, have the freedom to meld their own understandings in a particular way. It is clear that the presentation of ideas may be manipulated, within some broad limits of credibility. Yet the presentation of ideas in a particular way does not imply the internalisation of those ideas on behalf of either the author of that presentation or the recipient: "Frames are not objects or utensils in the objective world, which agents can pick up and use like tools. They are constitutive aspects of the subjectivity of social

agents which those agents cannot get behind or detach themselves from." (Crossley 2002: 141)

While claiming to bring the realm of beliefs and values into a theory of social movements criticised for its ignorance of culture, the focus on processes of strategic framing has in fact pushed ideas themselves to the periphery of its own approach. Simultaneously, its attempt to slot the interpretative frame into an explanatory theory that bridges the micro and meso levels of analysis is unconvincing. The fundamental understanding of schemata is that ideas may be organised into broader interpretative frames which provide understanding by locating individual elements within a constellation that, as a whole, make sense. This remains an appealing notion. In the following sections I 'reframe' the notion of framing, bringing it into an interpretative endeavour that, I argue, is suitable for understanding the diverse plurality of meanings that are presented within contemporary social movement activity.

Defining the Orientational Frame 1: Centring the Idea

Having problematized the ideational processes within social movements, the framing approach offers strong indications of how such work is carried out. With 'signification work' now in the foreground of social movement studies, it has become even more important to consider the signified itself. Taking part in a debate over the role of ideology in such research, Oliver and Johnston claim:

> Of course, all of social life is emergent, negotiated, and contextual …
> but to insist on the primacy of emergent processes above all … limits
> all research to descriptions of process. To … talk about how frames or
> ideologies relate to other features of social life, it is necessary to make
> the verbs of process in to nouns of ideas. (Oliver and Johnston 2000b:
> 62)

Our understanding of social movements, and of the societies in which they arise, will become richer if we accept the importance of content. The primary justification here is simply that what we are examining are political, as well as sociological phenomena. Movements offer reflections on the organisation of social, political and economic life which are of value to all those for whom a normative appraisal of current political and social structures is necessary. Secondary justifications for the importance of the message of movements come from several directions, but all hang on the potential to increase our sensitivity to the precise messages within any movement. From the sociological angle understanding the various bases of the political projects in which movements engage will feed back into our attempts to understand the processes of social movements. From a public policy angle it is now necessary to accept the social movement as an institution of social change or defence (Nathanson 2003). The organisations of 'global civil society' have turned increasingly to social movement activities; for instance, Oxfam, CAFOD and Christian Aid have all been active in anti-globalisation protests. But the multi-vocal nature of social movements makes it difficult to predict reactions to policy innovation and implementation. Frame analysis has already been taken into a range of substantive policy areas such as public heath (Lawrence 2004), education (Davies 2002), management (Creed, Langstraat and Scully 2002) and international relations (Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2002). In these fields advocacy is seen to take place in a form that is

analogous to social movement contention. Thus improving our ways of understanding frames can potentially have a much broader impact.

An 'orientational frame' identifies a justificatory worldview that may be utilised by social movement participants to create understanding of significant events and processes of which they are aware. The contents of an orientational frame may be directed to a range of issues including: political processes; moral values; visions for long-term change; the agency of the individual or the group; and the relationship of other social actors to different sets of ideas. The frame may be visualised as a web of interconnected beliefs and values; some ideas may be more central, and have more connections than others. Ideas are given specific meaning through their connections with a range of other ideas; that is, through their location in the frame. Because particular ideas may be imbued with moral force, the orientational frame also describes the drive to act in particular ways and offers a basis for emotional reactions to events or the beliefs of others. The orientational frame is an analytical construct and should, therefore, simplify the 'really existing' beliefs and values to which individuals subscribe. Within an interpretative process the orientational frame is useful to the extent that it makes sense of the proclamations and behaviour of individual and collective actors. How to find analytical purchase in the stew of ideas available within movements is described in the following sections.

Finding the Level

By describing the orientational frame as an abstraction from various individual beliefs I am attempting to move away from the tendency to describe the 'shared' beliefs of some collection of individuals (and thus the term 'collective action frame' itself). This point requires some clarification. In attempting to describe the ideas an individual may hold in a way that offers analytical value there are two options. First, one might shift attention from the individuals' thoughts to the 'thoughts' of the groups to which they belong. This is usually described as a change in levels of analysis. Secondly, we might shift attention from particular representations of to discover implied meanings and connections, tensions and contradictions that lay behind the specific articulations.

The first approach is that usually taken within the social movements literature around the concept of collective action frames. These are intended to convey the ideas that all members of a group agree upon and data is found within the position papers and policies agreed by the group. In short, the collective action frame takes us from the individual level of analysis to the collective. As explained above, this is not in keeping with the origin of the concept of 'frame'. Ontologically, it can only be based on the notion that members of the group all share a particular set of ideas on a particular set of topics. This generally leads the researcher to a very specific set of ideas, expressed in the language used by the particular SMO under study. However, any assumed link between the projected beliefs of an SMO and the actual beliefs of individual members is problematic because notional agreement can be created in ways that does not require genuine consensus. In a representational structure of decision-making, for instance, many participants may disagree with the statements made by an organisation while continuing to support that organisation because they agree with the process through which such statements were decided on. In any case, as suggested above, much contemporary collective action is characterised by ideational diversity. The individual-collective link,

while it may hold up for small organisations, is only likely to hinder understanding within contemporary movements based on broad coalitions.

The second approach to finding analytical purchase in empirical information about individuals' beliefs is via analytical abstraction. Here we must give up the attempt to describe an idea-set that a collective of individuals will whole-heartedly agree to. Our abstraction must, nevertheless, be connected to the real world of activists' beliefs and values. That is to say: the component parts of the orientational frame must all appear in activist discourse. Since it is the structure of ideas that give particular elements their meaning, the component parts of the orientational frame really encompass the connections between ideas rather than particular beliefs about the world or particular moral values. (It is difficult to conceive of a belief that can have substantial meaning without, in fact, connecting two or more subjects.) Further, individuals may use multiple signifiers to convey the same meaning; or the same words and phrases to convey multiple significations. Consequently, systematic interpretation is required, utilising an empirical base found in speech or texts produced by a variety of activists at a variety of times. The analytical processes of abstraction is an attempt to corral this herd of ideas into a simplified structure; some ideas can be penned together in a way that makes sense of movement activity and discourse while others refuse to submit. It is through this process that we begin to find the boundaries of an orientational frame; boundaries appear where the connections between elements become less referential or reinforcing and more distant or divisive. In the next section I will outline a particular hermeneutic methodology appropriate for this task; first, however, it will be profitable to examine the relationship between frames and ideologies.

Defining the Orientational Frame 2: Between Frames and Ideologies

Snow and colleagues use the terms 'frame' and 'ideology' almost interchangeably and consciously develop their description of three key framing tasks (diagnosis, prognosis and motivation) from Wilson's (1973) decomposition of ideology. Consequently, they been criticised for failing to distinguish coherently between frames and ideologies (Fisher 1997, Steinberg 1998). However, the debate has been relatively unproductive; Snow's most recent contribution, for instance, simply asserts that ideologies are variable phenomena and that the relationship between ideologies and collective action frames requires empirical study (Snow 2004: 399). Making substantial use of Michael Freeden's (1996) morphological approach to ideology I will argue that the conception of 'orientational frames' outlined above helps to mediate between specific activist frames and more general ideologies.

Beforehand, however, it is necessary to consider two more traditional perspectives on ideology. First, ideologies are often viewed critically; that this is central to conceptions of ideology is witnessed by the encyclopaedic definition as: "a collection of beliefs and values held by an individual or group *for other than purely epistemic reasons*" (Railton 1995: 392-3, italics added). Larrain extensively charts developments in the concept and demonstrates multiple pejorative approaches that share the view of ideology as an aberration from rational thought (1979: ch. 6). For present purposes it is unnecessary to tease apart these conceptions, but it is noteworthy that Oliver and Johnston's argument for bringing ideological concepts into frame analysis appeals for a

non-pejorative conceptualisation (2000a: 39). While academics may produce critiques of certain aspects of social movement thinking it seems clear that beginning an analysis by denying the intellectual value of activists' ideas is hardly conducive to understanding the messages of movements. A second perspective on ideologies, and one with which US social movement scholars are probably most familiar (see Zald 1996: 262), may initially appear more useful. Here ideologies are understood as, "idea complexes containing beliefs … which support or contest political arrangements and processes, as well as providing plans of action ... they act as devices for mobilizing mass political activity" (Freeden 1996: 16). This conception has been utilised in order to bring a positivist stance to the project of cataloguing and classification of various ideological traditions. That project seeks, from a multiplicity of ideas, a single thread that can pass judgements on a wide range of political issues. But by papering over the cracks of ideational debate, we get drawn into treating movements as unified political actors, with unified aims and strategies. Oversimplification hampers our potential for understanding the processes by which a movement finds its voice, articulates its message, and ultimately meets success or failure. (Melucci 1988, 1992)

More appealing, therefore, is a third conception of ideology. Michael Freeden's morphological approach steers a course that seeks to avoid either epistemological critique or oversimplification. Definitionally, Freeden describes ideologies as "ubiquitous forms of political thinking" that are "produced by, directed at, and consumed by groups" serving functions of "legitimation, integration, socialization, ordering, simplification and action-orientation" (1996: 22-3; subsequent references will indicate page numbers only). Freeden seeks a balanced ontological and epistemological position:

> ideologies are distinct thought-products that invite careful investigation
> in their own right… it is vital to recognize that in studying ideologies
> we are directing our analyses at actual arrangements of political
> thinking…. we should try to represent and discuss the features of
> ideologies that can be shown to exist. We need to do so while
> remembering also … not to neglect their wealth of detail, intricacy of
> structure, and complexity of argument. (23)

Actual ideologies thus resemble 'social facts' in Durkheim's (1982[1895]) sense. To some extent, they have an existence beyond the individual and can, therefore, be investigated empirically. Yet the category of ideology (significantly singular) is, rather, a construct through which the analyst seeks to interpret belief structures. Theorists debating "the generic term 'ideology' are largely conducting a debate about a particular perspective on the social and political world." (22) So, rather than imbuing the category of ideology with reality through inclusion in predictive-explanatory models, particular ideologies need to be explored in depth because they are interesting and valuable in themselves.

It should be clear that the combination of the definitional features of ideologies and Freeden's focus on the actual contents of belief structures has influenced my depiction of orientational frames above. Indeed, the linkage between the concepts may be so close as to make latter appears redundant. However, there is a difference in scale between the ideologies that Freeden examines and the orientational frames we can identify within activists' theories and, furthermore, this impacts on the methodology with which we

might study them. Freeden makes a similar move in arguing that the content of ideologies should matter to those engaged in political philosophy. He shows that the distinction between political philosophies and ideologies is found, not in a categorical difference, but rather in our mode of interpreting these ideational patterns (ch. 1). Orientational frames lie within the same family of phenomena: they are patterns of political ideas that are pieced together by actors in a manner that produces particular kinds of meaning, and makes purposive action possible (45-6). Yet differences of degree exist on several dimensions: as ideologies shade into political philosophies, so too do orientational frames shade into ideologies.

There are two particular dimensions on which I would like to differentiate orientational frames from ideologies. First, the orientational frame is conceived to make sense of thought in social movements and we would therefore expect particular frames to say something about the nature of action required for social change. To be sure, all ideologies contain some action-oriented beliefs. However, social movements are partly defined by their engagement in non-institutional forms of political action. Movement actors must, therefore, make use of belief-structures that critique existing political institutions and see a potential for agency that lies outside of those institutions. Recognition of the deeply interrelated nature of a movement's political content and its preferences for action offers rich potential in interpreting social movement activities. Tactical choices convey political beliefs and values. (McAdam 1996) Clearly, purposive action must be related to specific conceptions of agency and power. However, even where actions appear identical in form, these ideational connections may provide a different understanding of those actions for participants. A brief example will be illuminating. It makes sense to chain oneself to a tree (to 'lock on') if the felling of that tree is a part of or wholly constitutes a particular injustice that ought to be stopped. Alternatively, it makes sense to chain oneself to a tree if one believes that the public display of moral commitment is an efficient way to change wider societal beliefs and thus reduce future injustices. These action justifications are far from mutually exclusive, but the difference becomes vital when weighing concerns of security against concerns for media coverage. To put it another way, if you are 'locked on' in a forest and there is nobody to take photographs, is there any point? Activists are well aware of the connections between their practices and their structures of beliefs. Moreover, political beliefs are likely to be debated in reference to tactics for change since the primary purpose of interaction within social movements is to find ways to create that change. Freeden does, at times, stress the action-oriented nature of ideological thinking (105). Nevertheless, what he is interested in throughout, that is, what he substantively studies, are almost exclusively written texts. By studying the development of ideas through activist speech and practice and identifying orientational frames utilised by activists to make sense of their practice, we can perceive much more closely the particular kinds of action-orientation associated with social movements.

The second dimension of difference between ideologies and orientational frames relates to the creation of new ideas. Oliver and Johnson see ideological production as an elite activity where, in time, "'The masses' come to adopt systematic ideologies through processes of education and socialization." (2000a: 48) It is true that intellectuals may provide ideological leadership to social movements, as was the case with EP Thompson and the British New Left (see, Kenny 1995). Yet to begin with an assumption that

ideological production is removed from 'the masses' must surely be mistaken in any endeavour that seeks to understand the use of ideas within social movements. Freeden asks whether another view is possible: "to regard ideologies as forms of grass-roots political culture, focused on the political issues of the day, reflecting the widely prevalent thought processes that a specific society evolves over time … ideologies may be ubiquitous, emanating from popular reasoning and prejudice" (105-6). Freeden's own work claims to balance these perspectives. Yet while he undoubtedly pays attention to social and political context he nevertheless ties his investigation to great works of notable individuals. These individuals are "nodal and eloquent points of ideological discourse … offer[ing] an excellent illustration of a particular ideological position" (106). Given his broad historical sweep, Freeden's decision to use particular individuals in this way is methodologically valuable and he admits that in another context "the investigation of ideologies ought to examine mass, or at least large-scale, social thinking" (106). The social movement scholars' approach to interpretative frames offers some potential for carrying out such work, albeit in a way limited to movement participants. However, the collective action frame typically identifies temporary, campaign-specific beliefs and, problematically, carries the assumption that these are instrumentally variable rather than deeply held political values. The orientational frame offers a mid-range concept with which it becomes possible to identify the development of the political ideas that motivate movement action yet remains firmly embedded in the praxis of the grassroots.

A Hermeneutic Approach to Orientational Frames

The preceding sections delineate the orientational frame as an analytical device to direct the researcher to a particular level of analysis when examining the belief structures utilised by movement actors. Particular orientational frames are discoverable through abstraction of ideational elements from the concrete expressions of political ideas found in activists' speech, actions and textual artefacts. In previous work I have identified orientational frames through an ethnographic methodology comprised of participant observation, interviews and documentary analysis (Gillan 2006). However, a variety of data gathering techniques may justifiably be utilised to construct an empirical dataset for analysis and this paper does not seek to promote any particular one. Nevertheless, for the concept of orientational frames to be useful it is important to consider the mode of interpretation required to move from empirical data to analytical abstraction. This section therefore examines the role of hermeneutic interpretation in relation to orientational frames.

For present purposes we can understand hermeneutics as the development of a critique of positivist social science that targets attempts to ape the natural sciences in both methodology and theory construction. Centrally, hermeneuticists claim that the need to interpret human meaning starkly differentiates understanding human behaviour from explaining the phenomena of the natural world. Where human behaviour may be objectively and empirically observable, the meaning that actors attach to their behaviour can only be interpreted. Interpretation is defined as, "an attempt to make clear, to make sense of, an object of study. This object must, therefore be a text or text-analogue, which is in some way confused, incomplete, cloudy, seemingly contradictory ... The interpretation aims to bring to light an underlying coherence or sense." (Taylor 1971: 15) Of course, wherever we seek meaning it will be confused, incomplete and cloudy since

meaning and language are inextricably interwoven (Winch 1958: 40-4). Moreover, the political concepts from which orientational frames are created are likely to be heavily contested, carrying multiple alternative meanings. It is only once those concepts are situated in a patterned belief structure that they take on definite meanings; in Freeden's terms, the ideational elements are decontested through their relationship to other ideas.

Mirroring Freeden's morphological approach to ideology, the orientational frame may be considered a whole, consisting in many interrelating elements. The hermeneutic circle is an interpretative process precisely directed to clarifying meaning in a situation where parts and whole are co-dependent in this way:

> We face the dilemma: how can we know the parts without already knowing the whole context and, conversely, how can we grasp the whole without prior knowledge of the parts? This circularity is gradually and partially overcome by working backward and forward between the wider context and the particular text or action in question, building up an interpretation in layers since not everything can be understood at once… Movement between the part and the whole necessarily involves understanding phenomena in their intellectual, social and historical context. (Oliver 1983: 527-8)

Thus, the identification of orientational frames requires, firstly, an iterative process wherein the ideational elements themselves are continually reinterpreted as understanding of the larger structure of ideas is improved. Secondly, the process requires a broad exploration of context, a point I will return to shortly.

Within the iterative process of interpretation, "There are no final truth claims … since understanding is always part of a hermeneutic circle – a process of criss-crossing horizons mutually affecting each other and never converging in a final objective viewpoint." (Tate 1998: 14) This introduces a second dimension to the hermeneutic circle. On one hand, interpretation circles between the parts and whole of the research subject; on the other it circles between the analysts' interpretations and those of other interpreters. Thus, hermeneutics highlights the tentativeness of understanding. Despite the denial of permanent truth claims the hermeneutic circle halts the slide into the meaninglessness of absolute relativism. It asserts that the 'conversations' between text and interpreter, between author and interpreter, and between rival interpretations offer progress towards a better understanding of really existing social processes. That this understanding does not resemble the mode of explanation claimed by the natural sciences is to be expected, since hermeneutics is grounded on the distinction between the subjects of the human and natural sciences. Furthermore, "The "hermeneutic circle" … is no more damaging for the empirical credentials of interpretative sociology than the corresponding circularity of theory and theory-laden observations in natural science." (Little 1995) This is because it contains a repeatable and coherent approach to understanding, and because the process "makes conscious the prejudices governing our own understanding, so that a more balanced evaluation of a text becomes possible." (Freeden 1996: 115)

Hermeneutics has been criticised for its lack of clear, practical methodological guidelines (Hamel 1998). Indeed, hermeneutics offers a philosophically based approach rather than a particular set of techniques for research. Nevertheless, some methodological tendencies encouraged by a hermeneutic perspective are discernible and Prasad (2002:

24-6) offers some suggestive comments that help to fill out the approach. First, the notion of a 'text' for interpretation is understood very widely, encompassing human action in general. This is particularly valuable for the investigation of orientational frames since, as argued above, forms of political action should be considered as meaningful data. Second, context may be defined at different levels of comprehensiveness and may be considered either synchronically or diachronically. In examining an orientational frame the specific political culture within which the protagonists are situated forms both synchronic and diachronic context. The history of geographically or topically similar social movements; the attitudes to key issues by non-movement actors such as government and media; the rival understandings of key movement events; and the literature read by those within the movement are all likely to be useful sources in locating the frame within the relevant context. Travelling the hermeneutic circle will take the analyst repeatedly from the broader political culture to the specific ideational elements found in primary data and back again; at each stage, coherence is improved. Third, analyses often begin at the level of most specificity, and move towards a more general level. In other words, the first iteration generally progresses from the parts to the whole. This directs us to begin with movement actors' articulations of beliefs; a useful starting point because such articulations may well direct the researcher to those aspects of political culture that are most directly relevant. Fourth, because hermeneutics does not seek to understand the authors' intentions, but rather a deeper, more holistic meaning, such analysis is eminently suitable for texts with many identifiable authors or none. This matches Freeden's assertion that ideologies "may have no identifiable makers, or many makers" (34-5). Since the identification of orientational frames seeks to abstract from individual (or organisational) utterances, this is one further useful aspect of the hermeneutic process.

The forgoing comments outline a specific mode of research that offers the ability to increase understanding, given a range of sources of empirical data relevant to the research subject. However, defining the research subject itself presents a significant problem. Social movements are typically defined in relation to a specific cause such as peace, feminism, or nationalism. However, when the researcher defines a social movement as an object of study they necessarily reify what is, in fact, a set of events and processes that may have competing interpretations. Melucci argues that reification gives the aggregation of individual and collective behaviours an undeserved "ontological weight and qualitative homogeneity; collective reality, as it were, exists as a unified thing." As a result, "the *collective dimension* of social behaviour is taken as a given, as a datum obvious enough to require no further analysis." (Melucci 1996: 15) The Meluccian challenge is therefore to analyse social movements without starting from an assumption of unity. Taking the orientational frame as a unit of analysis is helpful in this regard, since we begin with individuals' interpretations of their action and the world on which they are acting, seeking to abstract to a level at which some generalised description is possible. Again, like Freeden's ideologies, orientational frames are constructed collectively but this does not mean that they adhere to any particular group. (24-5) The practical difficulty for the researcher is to define a research subject from which to begin analysis and undoubtedly one must be guided to begin with organisations oriented to a thematically described movement. This should be understood as a temporary understanding that enables initial collection of empirical data from which to begin a hermeneutic process of discovery.

Engaging with the Meluccian challenge therefore reaffirms the value of the hermeneutic circle.

Conclusions

Activists' beliefs may appear to place them outside of the mainstream of political thought, yet they engage concretely with essential political concepts such as democracy, power and agency and the particular political contests of the day. Social movements thereby represent ideas in motion. That such ideas cannot be simply read off press releases or placards should not be a barrier to researchers' attempts to give them serious consideration. The argument of this paper may be construed in two directions. First, it attempts to demonstrate the value of political theory in understanding social movements and is therefore an appeal to social movement scholars to take seriously the realm of ideologies. In doing so, the paper argues for the importance of understanding the political content of social movements. Thus, the second way this paper might be construed is as an appeal to scholars of political ideologies to take social movements more seriously as both a source of ideas and as a concrete representation of political beliefs in practice.

Movement practices tend to encourage the simplification of ideas to temporally specific demands and resonant slogans. However, protagonists can only make sense and justify their own actions when these are set within wider ideational complexes. This paper specifies the concept 'orientational frame' to capture those wider belief structures. Three different bodies of theory all begin from the starting point that meaning comes from the location of ideational elements within constellations of ideas. First, the framing approach in social movement scholarship began by borrowing this insight, but has tended to focus on the processes of strategic framing rather than the belief structures that inform activists' understandings of the political world. Second, Freeden's morphological approach to ideologies focuses specifically on the interconnections between ideads through which political concepts are decontested. Such ideologies tend to have a greater weight and tradition than the frames utilised by activists, since they have been subject to extended philosophical development over many years. By contrast, activists utilise ideas from the broader political culture to understand the changing present. Third, hermeneutics uses the same insight concerning the construction of meaning in order to outline a systematic approach to increasing understanding in the social sciences. Adoption of the hermeneutic approach for the identification of orientational frames thus brings a methodology that satisfyingly mirrors the object of study.

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