

**For Interest or for Meaning:**  
A Comparative Analysis of Two Perspectives on Collective Action

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**Abstract**

This paper argues that we can discern and fruitfully compare two scholarly approaches to the study of collective action: a *rational choice perspective* and an *identity-based perspective*. In order to detail and analyze each perspective, I draw on select works of political science that comprise them and conceptually disaggregate each piece into the following five components: (1) *theoretical orientation*; (2) *social context*; (3) *political context*; (4) *conception of individuals*; (5) *methodology*. I begin in Part II by very briefly defining the foregoing five dimensions. I then commence the core of my analysis in Part III by discussing the rational choice perspective, focusing on the work of Mancur Olson, Timur Kuran, and Elinor Ostrom. I transition to the identity-based perspective in Part IV, focusing on the contributions of Mark Beissinger, Deborah Yashar, and Elisabeth Jean Wood. Because of the admittedly restricted set of works receiving close attention in both parts, throughout my analysis I shall reference *echoes* – cognate scholarship that shares the particular attribute being described but which were omitted from the more in-depth analysis – primarily in the footnotes. Further, as I transition from analyzing one perspective to the next, I will highlight the overarching differences between the two, particularly along the five dimensions outlined above. Part V concludes by pondering whether future scholarship should seek to develop a third perspective occupying the theoretical space between the rational choice and the identity-based approaches, and posits that such an effort would be both premature and unwise.

## I. Introduction

This paper sheds light on the dynamics of collective action via a focused survey of the political science literature on the subject.<sup>1</sup> It argues that we can discern and fruitfully compare two scholarly approaches to the study of collective action: a *rational choice perspective* and an *identity-based perspective*. By “perspective,” I mean that these are broad conceptual labels that capture the common orientation of their constitutive scholarship while leaving room for more specific and nuanced distinctions. In order to detail and analyze each perspective, I draw on select works of political science that comprise them and conceptually disaggregate each piece into the following five components: (1) *theoretical orientation*; (2) *social context*; (3) *political context*; (4) *conception of individuals*; (5) *methodology*. In so doing, my goal is to first highlight what the works within each perspectival class share, and second, what distinguishes them from one another. I begin in **Part II** by very briefly defining the foregoing five dimensions. I then commence the core of my analysis in **Part III** by discussing the rational choice perspective, focusing on the work of Mancur Olson (1971), Timur Kuran (1995), and Elinor Ostrom (1998). I transition to the identity-based perspective in **Part IV**, focusing on the contributions of Mark Beissinger (2002; 2013), Deborah Yashar (2005), and Elisabeth Jean Wood (2003). Because of the admittedly restricted set of works receiving close attention in both parts, throughout my analysis I shall reference *echoes* – cognate scholarship that shares the particular attribute being described but which were omitted from the more in-depth analysis – primarily in the footnotes. Further, as I transition from analyzing one perspective to the next, I will highlight the overarching differences between the two, particularly along the five dimensions outlined above. **Part V** concludes by pondering whether future scholarship should seek to develop a third perspective occupying the theoretical space between the rational choice and the identity-based approaches, and posits that such an effort would be both premature and unwise.

## II. Comparative Standards: Five Dimensions

If we are to avoid running “before having learned how to walk,” to paraphrase Sartori (1970: 1039)’s fortuitous phrase, we should conceptualize the standards of comparison before proceeding

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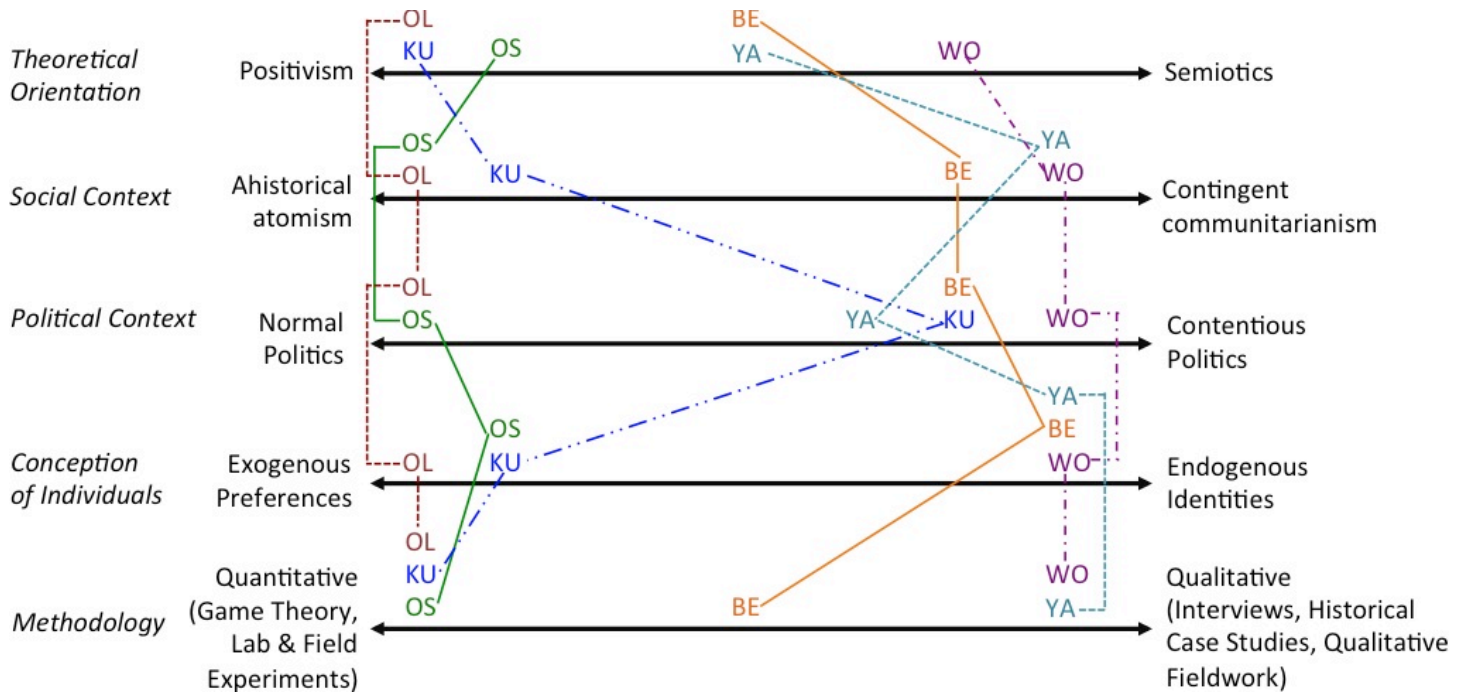
<sup>1</sup> Some works germane to the study of collective action are omitted from this comparative analysis, including Ted Gurr (1970)’s relative deprivation theory and Sidney Tarrow (1998)’s discussion of cycles and repertoires of contention. Though these can be fit into the following framework, they are less illuminating for a discussion of the rational choice and identity-based perspectives than the works selected here.

with our perspectival analysis. Here, the standards of comparison take the form of five dimensions. The first dimension is the most encompassing, namely the overall *theoretical orientation* of the scholarly work. I conceptualize this dimension as running from positivist approaches, which theorize agents inhabiting an objective reality and seeking to maximize their individual utility functions in (strategic) interactions with others, to semiotic approaches, which theorize the predominance of meaning-making through the interpretation of culturally or linguistically embedded signs and symbols.<sup>2</sup> The second dimension is the *social context* constructed by the work, which runs from ahistorical atomism, where society is the aggregation of individual agents at one point in time, to contingent communitarianism, where society is conceptualized as a historically emergent and contingent community structure (or multiple community structures) in which individuals are deeply embedded. The third dimension is the *political context* theorized by the work. I define this dimension as running from normal politics, which entails relatively quotidian, low-salience, rule-abiding political dynamics, to contentious politics, denoting disruptive, high-salience, rule-challenging or rule-breaking forms of political behavior. The fourth dimension is the *conception of individuals* espoused by the theory. Here, I conceptualize a scale running from individuals holding a bundle of exogenous preferences to individuals internalizing a series of endogenous identities. Finally, the last dimension is a *methodology* dimension. This entails whether the scholar relies on quantitative methods, defined to encompass game theory and lab/field experiments subsequently assessed via statistical analysis, or qualitative methods, defined as including interviews, historical case studies, and qualitative fieldwork. The details of the foregoing dimensions will be illustrated further in Parts III and IV. Nevertheless, we should note that the rational choice and identity-based perspectives tend to lay claims to opposite territories along the foregoing five dimensions. To illustrate this point, and as a preview of the analysis to follow, Figure 1 roughly situates the scholarship that will receive sustained attention along the five dimensions. Notice that although a perfect polarization fails to arise, the works do tend to cluster together:

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<sup>2</sup> I recognize that these labels have long, complex philosophical lineages, but space does not permit elaboration here. However, we might consider the “ideal-typical” scholarship that exemplifies each label: on the positivist end, we might think of positive economics, such as Milton Friedman’s *Essays in Positive Economics* (1953); on the semiotic end, we might think of interpretive anthropology, such as Victor Turner’s *The Forest of Symbols* (1967) or Clifford Geertz’ *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). The latter distinguishes between “an experimental science in search of law” and an “interpretive one in search of meaning,” and this roughly maps on to the positivism-semiotics dimension conceptualized here (see Geertz 1973: 5).

**Figure 1: Approximate Orientation of Select Collective Action Scholarship Along Five Dimensions**



Note: Scholars in the rational choice perspective: OL = Mancur Olson (1971); KU = Timur Kuran (1995); OS = Elinor Ostrom (1998). Scholars in the identity-based perspective: BE = Mark Beissinger (2002; 2013); YA = Deborah Yashar (2005); WO = Elisabeth Jean Wood (2003).

### III. The Rational Choice Perspective on Collective Action

In general, the rational choice perspective of collective action tends to hold a positivist theoretical orientation, an ahistorical and atomistic conception of society, a conception of politics characterized by relatively “normal” and cool-headed political interactions, a conception of individuals as holding exogenous preferences, and a methodological predilection for quantitative methods. To illustrate these tendencies (and the occasional deviation from them), we begin with the canonical rational choice statement on the subject – Mancur Olson’s *The Logic of Collective Action*.

Olson’s study of collective action revolves around the “organization,” exemplified by labor unions, farm organizations, cartels, and corporations (1971: 6-7). It may be surmised from this selection of objects of inquiry that we are in the realm of normal politics – the domain, in Albert Hirschman (1977)’s terminology, not of *passions* but of *interests*. Indeed, “the kinds of organizations that are the focus of this study are *expected* to further the interests of their members. Labor unions are expected to strive for higher wages and better working conditions [...] farm organizations are

expected to strive for favorable legislation [...] cartels are expected to strive for higher prices [...] the corporation is expected to further the interests of its stockholders” (ibid: 6). To emphasize the irrelevance of the passions within his framework, Olson notes that even the state cannot exclusively rely on “all of the emotional resources at its command” to “finance its most basic and vital activities,” which necessitates the use of its coercive capacity to successfully foster collective action (ibid: 13).

Herein Olson highlights a collective action problem, conceptualized through the logic of game theory and formalized via mathematical modeling: particularly in large organizations seeking to provide a public good to their members, the loss of support on the part of any one member will not noticeably increase the burden<sup>3</sup> on other members. As a result, the “rational person” expects that his/her free-riding will not impact the organization’s prospects for the successful provision of the public (non-rival and non-excludable) good, and hence all individuals have an incentive to free-ride (ibid: 12; 15). Smaller organizations tend to overcome this problem because each member knows that the burden of provision is shared by only a few counterparts, and hence free-riding by any one member more substantially decreases the prospect of public good provision.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, in both large and small groups comprised of instrumentally rational agents, there is a presumption that the collective action effort will either fail or lead to the sub-optimal supply of the public good (ibid: 27-28). In the absence of coercion, then, either a group member must “find that his personal gain from having the collective good exceeds the total cost of providing some amount of it,” or a material “selective inducement” must be provided in order for individuals to act in their group interest (ibid: 34; 45). Note that the motives of these first-movers, who are willing to bear a disproportionate share of the cost for collective action or to provide a selective incentive for others to join in the effort, are treated as exogenous. In short, here agents are analogized to firms, engaging in strategic cost-benefit calculations within an objective material reality, and where their social interdependence is

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<sup>3</sup> This includes not only the cost of good provision, such as labor union dues, but also, in a case where organizational infrastructure is lacking, the start-up cost for collective action (Olson 1971: 47-48).

<sup>4</sup> This argument has been both echoed and challenged by Marwell & Oliver (1993). The authors highlight that “Olson’s group-size argument is clearly correct only when the good has zero jointness of supply, that is, when the cost of providing the good increases proportionately to the number who share it” (Marwell & Oliver 1993: 43). Thus although the authors posit that “when a good has high jointness of supply it may be provided by fewer people in a larger group than in a smaller group,” so long as the large group is heterogenous enough that there is a relatively high chance that a few individuals will value the good to such a degree that they will bear a disproportionate share of the burden to provide it (ibid: 49-52).

ahistorically and thinly conceptualized as the degree to which “the individual actions of any one or more members in a group are noticeable to any other individuals in the group” (ibid: 45).

As illustrated in Figure 1, Olson is perhaps the “purest” exemplar of the rational choice perspective on collective action. Indeed, while Timur Kuran’s *Private Truths, Public Lies* relies on most of Olson’s rational choice premises, he also seeks to complicate his narrative. Specifically, Kuran emphasizes that “[t]here can be no Olsonian incentives until someone is already active,” and that Olson presupposes “that the potential beneficiaries of a movement can easily, if not costlessly, communicate” (1995: 48). Both are important shortcomings as far as Kuran is concerned, for he is less interested in the context of normal politics than in the more contentious domain of political revolutions.<sup>5</sup> As such, Kuran accepts that some individuals “have unusually intense wants on particular matters,” but unlike Olson’s materially-driven first-movers, these “activists” are driven by “extraordinarily great expressive needs” (ibid: 50). Hence Kuran briefly acknowledges that a purely positivist and materialist narrative cannot fully capture the dynamics of collective action in a more contentious political setting. Nevertheless, Kuran treats the presence of activists and their unusually expressive drive as given, and hence ultimately constructs a narrative of collective action that fits within the rational-choice paradigm of exogenous private preferences.

Importantly, however, for Kuran preferences have a “dual” nature: in addition to *private preferences*, which are conceptualized as sincere, there are *public preferences*, which are often falsified (ibid: 247-248). The dual model of preferences acknowledges a social context that deviates from a purely atomistic society, since, unlike private preferences, the “public preferences of individuals are interdependent” (ibid: 247). Thus while private preferences are treated as exogenous, public preferences are endogenized, and both “need not stay fixed over time” (ibid: 249). The fertility of this distinction is leveraged by Kuran to explicate his game theoretic tipping-point model of revolutionary collective action. Public preferences incorporate a “revolutionary threshold,” namely the level of public opposition of the government “at which [an individual] will abandon the government for the opposition” (ibid: 248). In some situations where the “threshold sequence” of individuals is incrementally ordered, small changes in the revolutionary threshold of even a single

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<sup>5</sup> For an illuminating echo, namely a rational choice treatment of collective action in contentious political situations, see Stathis Kalyvas’ study of the decision of whether or not to employ indiscriminate violence that kills non-combatants in civil war settings in *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (2006).

individual (as when they have “an unpleasant encounter at some government ministry”) can engender a “revolutionary bandwagon,” tipping the system towards contentious collective action (ibid: 250-254). This game theoretic analysis highlights that even if most individuals remain instrumental cost-benefit calculators, collective action need not arise out of a common or even individual purposive effort (as in Olson’s “selective incentive” framework), but may equally emerge when relatively unplanned and “small events” interact with a society’s distribution of public preferences to generate “large outcomes” that are unpredictable *ex-ante* (ibid: 250). Ultimately, by moving from the realm of normal politics to the political domain of contentious politics, Kuran is forced to relax some of the more classically parsimonious rational-choice tendencies of Olson, even as he ultimately remains broadly loyal to the rational choice perspective.

In a similar, yet substantively distinct vein, Elinor Ostrom’s 1997 APSA address, “A Behavioral Approach to the Rational Choice Theory of Collective Action,” seeks to incorporate the experimental findings of psychologists and behavioral economics into the rational choice perspective. Specifically, Ostrom partially relaxes Olson’s conception of individuals as perfect cost-benefit calculators holding purely exogenous preferences: “Our evolutionary heritage has hardwired us to be boundedly self-seeking at the same time that we are capable of learning heuristics and norms, such as reciprocity, that help achieve successful collective action” (Ostrom 1998: 2). Methodologically, Ostrom praises the ability of experiments to “allow one to test precisely whether individuals behave within a variety of institutional settings as predicted by theory” (ibid: 5). As such, she emphasizes two experimental findings that should push rational choice approaches towards a “second-generation” behavioralist conception of rationality: First, laboratory experiments consistently find that individuals who are “allowed to communicate face to face” in iterated games are better able to cooperate with one another, in part by “increasing trust,” “adding values to the subjective payoff structure,” and reinforcing “prior normative values,” the most important of which are norms of reciprocity (ibid: 5; 6-7; 10-11).<sup>6</sup> Second, field experiments have highlighted that participants often collaborate to restructure rules and construct third-party enforcement mechanisms so as to alter the payoff structures

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<sup>6</sup> Here, Ostrom echoes the important work of multiple game theorists, in particular Robert Axelrod’s *The Evolution of Cooperation* (1984), which explains how agents locked into an iterated prisoner’s dilemma framework can nonetheless achieve pareto-optimal outcomes via “tit-for-tat” strategies.

of individuals and incentivize collective action (ibid: 7-8).<sup>7</sup> Despite these extensions of traditional rational choice models, however, Ostrom proclaims her experiment-driven, behavioralist approach to be “consistent with all models of rational choice,” and concludes that “theories based on complete but thin rationality will continue to play an important role” in the study of collective action (ibid: 9; 16).

Ostrom’s approach, like Kuran’s, challenges some of the specific premises of Olson’s classic without parting from the overall framework of the rational choice perspective of collective action. Though she excitedly proclaims that “[l]aboratory experiments provide evidence that a substantial proportion of individuals use reciprocity norms even in the very short-term environments of an experiment,” Ostrom fails to incorporate within her subject of inquiry the original source of said norms (ibid: 11). As such, Ostrom’s conception of society remains fundamentally limited to the emergent phenomena of a series of short-term and relatively ahistorical interactions (often amongst strangers). Further, Ostrom’s privileging of experimental research, which is constrained by the restrictions imposed by the IRB approval process and by a relatively sterile, controlled environment, limits her to the domain of normal politics, and on at least this front it represents a regression vis-à-vis Kuran to the study of the more quotidian, low-salience interactions studied by Olson.

#### **IV. The Identity-Based Perspective on Collective Action**

As we move to the exemplars of the identity-based perspective of collective action, we should note that they all take the rational choice perspective, and Olson’s contribution in particular, as a point of departure or constructive foil.<sup>8</sup> As such, while identity-based approaches are not necessarily anti-rationalist, they do emphasize an alternative set of variables underlying collective action. Specifically, the identity-based perspective embraces a more semiotic theoretical orientation, conceptualizes society as historically contingent and communitarian, is particularly interested in contentious political contexts, conceptualizes individuals as holding endogenous identities, and generally relies on qualitative methodological approaches for causal inference, including historical case studies, unstructured and semi-structured interviews, and other forms of qualitative fieldwork. Note that this approach rejects Ronald Inglehart (1990)’s thesis that individuals espouse post-material

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<sup>7</sup> The latter finding draws particularly from Ostrom’s own foundational work on the provision of common-pool resources in her 1990 book, *Governing the Commons*, for which she was awarded the 2009 Nobel Prize.

<sup>8</sup> See Beissinger (2002: 10-11); Yashar (2005: 11-12); and Wood (2003: 240) for explicit references to Olson or to discussions/critiques of the “instrumentalist” framework.



values only upon being materially satiated via economic affluence,<sup>9</sup> as it is often in contentious political settings that society's most needy tend to rally around identity over material interests.

We begin with Mark Beissinger's scholarship, which exemplifies the semiotic turn to identity. In *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*, Beissinger seeks to answer the same question that Kuran explores in Chapter 16 of *Private Truths, Public Lies*: how did the "seemingly impossible" collapse of the Soviet Union quickly come "to be widely viewed as the seemingly inevitable?" (Beissinger 2002: 3). While at first Beissinger seems to echo Kuran's tipping point model by highlighting how individuals were able to "ride the tide of nationalism generated from the actions of others," Beissinger's argument focuses not on preference falsification but on the *constitutive power of collective action* itself, or "the idea that identities could be defined in the context of agency" (ibid: 9). Leveraging qualitative event analysis, Beissinger posits that the study of events helps "us to understand the ways in which the politics of the possible shapes the politics of identity. Events constitute moments of heightened contention when the choice between competing forms of identity must be made" (ibid: 24). Hence the constitutive power of the event, which exposes the mutability of identity, is engendered by the transition from normal or "quiet" politics to contentious or "noisy" politics, which produces a "perceived opening of political opportunities" to contest the established political order (ibid: 26). Yet despite his focus on a compressed period of "thickened history,"<sup>10</sup> Beissinger conceives of the past period of normal, state-driven nationalist politics as structuring the set of political opportunities that open up through the contentious event, as "the efforts of states to impose and institutionalize a particular national order" spur "those who oppose this order to prepare for moments when disruption becomes possible" (ibid). *Nota bene* that while identities can be instrumentally leveraged by activists as openings for contestation arise, it is their meaning-making potential that renders them effective mobilizational tools.<sup>11</sup> Finally, Beissinger's event analysis places social context at the center of his study of contentious collective

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<sup>9</sup> Inglehart (1990: 68) labels this the "scarcity hypothesis," which posits that as economic resources become less scarce, the post-material need for "esteem, self-expression, and aesthetic satisfaction" increase.

<sup>10</sup> Defined as "a period in which the pace of challenging events quickens to the point that it becomes practically impossible to comprehend them and they come to constitute an increasingly significant part of their own causal structure" (ibid: 27). Of the studies discussed here, only Beissinger (2013) conforms to this theory, for most of the Orange revolutionaries were more educated and far from economically deprived.

<sup>11</sup> The mobilizational power of identity echoes the third component of McAdam et al. (1996: 2)'s tripartite theory of social movements, namely "framing processes" that "mediate between opportunity and action."

action: “there is always a social quality to an event,” for it requires not just “participants,” but also “those who observe,” and it is this “spectaclelike quality to an event” that “provides it with much of its transformative power” by inviting “the “observer” to become agent” (ibid: 15-16). Yet despite Beissinger’s congruence with the identity-based perspective, his methodology is more Catholic, embracing both statistical analysis to identify historically-emergent structural factors and qualitative process-tracing of select events to more deeply probe the dynamics of thickened history (ibid: 41-42).

Beissinger’s analysis of the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine broadly mirrors the foregoing approach. Via a single event case-study, he highlights the power of “common identities and symbols rather than common values or selective incentives” to mobilize individuals into an anti-establishment coalition, despite it being plagued by a poor organizational infrastructure and weak ties (Beissinger 2013: 2; 15).<sup>12</sup> Ever the methodological pluralist, here Beissinger relies on evidence from two surveys conducted during the period of contentious collective action (ibid: 5). “What stands out” from the survey results, he remarks, “is how powerfully identity [...] (in particular, language and religion) shaped individual attitudes toward and participation in the revolution” (ibid: 15). Yet although symbolic capital and identity fostered collective action, it was precisely their mobilizational effectiveness in lieu of ideological coherence and organizational strength that minimized the revolution’s long-term impact. For as a return to normal politics took place, semiotic ties weakened while interest and ideological divisions resurfaced (ibid: 17).

The rousing of identity in the context of a switch from low-salience to high salience politics is an equally central component of Deborah Yashar’s *Contesting Citizenship in Latin America*. Relying almost exclusively on qualitative fieldwork, including elite interviews, focus groups, analysis of newspaper reports, and comparative historical case studies, Yashar seeks to explain the recent and uneven rise of indigenous collective action across Latin America (Yashar 2005: 25-27). She notes that until recently, the comparatively high “equalization and universalization of citizenship” in the region allowed Latin American states to democratize “with no apparent ethnic hitches – no ethnic violence; and no challenges to carve up the nation-state” (ibid: 33). Yet the historical reformulation of citizenship regimes from a corporatist model, which “advanced civil and social rights [...]

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<sup>12</sup> For an echo relating to an internationalized form of collective action conceptualized as the “transnational advocacy network,” which mobilizes individuals via the use of symbolic politics rather than through material incentives, see Keck and Sikkink (1998); For an echo relating not to the instrumental leveraging of symbols but to the instrumental manipulation of culture, see Laitin (1988).

alongside class-based forms of interest intermediation,” to a neoliberal model, which “advanced civil and political rights alongside pluralist forms of interest intermediation,” unwittingly threatened the community autonomy and land rights of indigenous groups (ibid: 55). Where corporatist citizenship receded and interacted with (a) *political liberalization*, which “legally and practically resulted in the freedom to organize,” and (b) the presence of *transcommunity networks*, which “provided links that [became] a basis for forging translocal (and subsequently transnational) indigenous identities and movements,” as in Mexico, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Bolivia, the ground was fertile for indigenous collective action (ibid: 78; 73). Where these factors were missing, as in Peru, indigenous organizing failed to evolve “beyond the local level” (ibid: 18-19; 54-55).

Several points require elaboration. First, for Yashar the communitarian organization of society is critical if we are to understand the indigenous movements’ *postliberal challenge*: It was precisely an attempt by the state to reorient society along a more “atomized or individuated set of state-society relations” by manipulating the content of citizenship regimes that fostered the “(re)emergence of indigenous leaders, the (re)constitution of communities, and the expression of (evolving) indigenous identities at the community level” (ibid: 57; 63). Second, the mobilization of identity (conceptualized not as fixed but as “historically contingent” and “open to change”) took place in the context of relatively contentious politics, particular in Ecuador where in 1997 and 2000 indigenous groups “spearheaded multisector protests that toppled the government” (ibid: 8; 24). Third, while the presence of an organizational infrastructure had to coincide with the existence of political associational space in order for indigenous collective action to be viable, it was ultimately the semiotic salience of identity and community that brought indigenous peoples together. Indeed, the “*indigenous* character of the contemporary movements [...] extends beyond material concerns for land as a productive resource,” and only a non-instrumentalist conception of ethnicity elucidates why “ethnic identities” were politicized instead of “material interests” (ibid: 68; 12). Finally, unlike Beissinger’s event analysis, Yashar’s temporal focus is more prolonged, highlighting how long-term processes of state formation become “the historical referent for” political identity (ibid: 9).

Elisabeth Jean Wood’s *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* echoes Yashar’s framework but with one crucial distinction: whereas for Yashar collective action requires a political associational space that shelters would-be participants from severe repression, Wood seeks

to explain precisely why “protest deepen[ed] to insurgency” despite “mounting repression” over the course of the Salvadoran Civil War (Wood 2003: 227). Such “high-risk collective action” Wood concludes, cannot be explained by material class distinctions, for these “did not map local residents neatly into the categories of insurgent and government supporters,” nor by an Olsonian selective benefits framework, as insurgent provision of protection and access to land failed to mobilize individuals against the state (ibid: 231; 228). Rather, in periods of “extreme state violence,” three non-instrumentalist factors best explain insurgent collective action: (1) *participation*, which was valued “*per se*: to struggle for the realization of the reign of God was to live a life valuable to oneself and in the eyes of God despite its poverty, humiliations, and suffering;” (2) *defiance*, or the support of the insurgency as a means to assert “a claim to dignity and personhood;” and (3) *pleasure in agency*, which “increased self-esteem and pride in self-determination [... via participation] not just in any intentional activity but in the course of making history, and not just any history but a history they perceived as more just” (ibid: 228; 232-233; 235).

To study the foregoing culturally embedded factors, Wood had to immerse herself into a prolonged period of ethnographic fieldwork in El Salvador, where she conducted over 200 interviews with former insurgents and compiled life histories and maps drawn by them. Through this qualitative research strategy,<sup>13</sup> Wood unearthed the very same communitarian organization of society stressed by Yashar, particularly as she probed insurgents’ conception of “just history:” it is a “political and social equality,” she concludes, founded upon a “collective pride” and “assertions of equality” that did not extend to non-insurgents (ibid: 231). These “moral commitments” embedded “in the new forms of community that had emerged during the course of the war,” combined with the intrinsic, expressive value of collective action, bestowed “meaning through continued activism” upon the war’s victims (ibid: 240). In contrast to Olson’s instrumentalism, the semiotic value of collective action “was not contingent on success or even on one’s contributing to the likelihood of success” (ibid: 233). Yet Wood emphasizes historical sequencing by highlighting the path dependency of successful collective action: where it succeeded, it “reinforced insurgent values and norms [...] beliefs [...] and practices,” fostering a new “collective identity” and cultural community that “together carried out challenging deeds and celebrated together their success” (ibid: 238). Ultimately, Wood’s ethnographic focus on

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<sup>13</sup> Note that Wood does illustrate her argument with a formal model supplied in the appendix of her book, but it is largely ancillary to her overall qualitative approach.

endogenous identities, intrinsic values, and symbolic rituals of celebration and rebellion, reminds one of the works of interpretive anthropologists like Victor Turner more than the scholarship of mainstream political science.<sup>14</sup> The semiotic turn past rational choice is thus complete.

## V. Against a Third Perspective

Following any such binary comparative perspectival analysis, it is tempting to advocate for a third perspective occupying the unclaimed theoretical space between the two. Yet such an approach would prove both premature and unwise. As Figure 1 illustrates, the rational choice and identity-based perspectives of collective action denote general orientations rather than a narrow and hegemonic set of rules for scholarship. There is spillover between the two approaches, as when Kuran enters the realm of contentious politics and embraces the “expressive” motives of activists, or when Beissinger conducts a large-N statistical analysis to uncover systematic causal effects of structural variables. In fact, it is precisely this binary perspectival structure that engenders what we may call ‘centripetal theoretical competition,’ to analogize from Sartori (1976; 1990)’s work on party system dynamics. Most political scientists are neither like interpretive anthropologists nor positive economists; they occupy the theoretical space in between. For this reason, and as has been shown in the foregoing analysis, adherents to both the rational choice and the identity-based perspective have had to engage with one-another, occasionally incorporating each-other’s insights and spurring perspectival co-evolution.<sup>15</sup> This dynamic has engendered a degree of theoretical moderation and fertile inter-perspectival dialogue that may well be upset if a third perspective is squeezed in between the two. For as perspectival boundaries become less clear under the challenge from a third approach, cross-pollination may be replaced by straw-manning and ‘centrifugal theoretical competition,’ as adherents to all perspectives recoil to their purist foundations in a defensive search for distinctiveness. The truth is that both perspectives are encompassing enough to allow for internal disagreement and further development. To borrow once more from Hirschman (1970), the demands of *loyalty* to either perspective are far from suffocating; consequently, future scholarship should exercise its *voice* and push existing perspectives towards more fruitful lands before embracing the allure of *exit*.

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<sup>14</sup> One notable exception, and a political science echo of Wood’s book, is the interpretivist work of Lisa Wedeen, particularly in *Ambiguities of Domination* (1999).

<sup>15</sup> For an additional rational-choice theory of collective action influenced by identity-based approaches, see Chong (1991)’s discussion of “public-spirited” collective action during the American Civil Rights Movement.

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