


Ethnographic Approaches to Contentious Politics: The What, How, and Why

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Abstract

How should we study contentious politics in an era rife with new forms of contention, both in the United States and abroad? The introduction to this special issue draws attention to one particularly crucial methodological tool in the study of contention: political ethnography. It showcases the ways in which ethnographic approaches can contribute to the study of contentious politics. Specifically, it argues that “what,” “how,” and “why” questions are central to the study of contention and that ethnographic methods are particularly well-suited to answering them. It also demonstrates how ethnographic methods push scholars to both expand the objects of inquiry and rethink what the relevant units of analysis might be. By uncovering hidden processes, exploring social meanings, and giving voice to unheard stories, ethnography and “ethnography-plus” approaches contribute to the study of contention and to comparative politics, writ large.

Keywords

contentious politics, political ethnography, qualitative methods, social movements

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How should we study contentious politics in an era rife with new forms of contention, both in the United States and abroad? With the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements rippling from the United States to localities across the globe, mobilizations occurring from Russia to Peru, and civil conflicts raging from Thailand to Syria, the study of contention ought to be at the heart of comparative politics. There are, of course, diverse ways to study contentious politics, as recent work on both repression and mobilization have evidenced (e.g., [Berman, 2020](#); [Blaydes, 2018](#); [Ekiert & Perry, 2020](#); [Fu, 2018](#); [Giugni & Grasso, 2019](#); [Hassan, 2020](#); [Mattingly, 2020](#); [Mares & Young, 2019](#); [Nugent, 2020](#); [Pan, 2020](#); [Schatz, 2021](#); [Simmons, 2016](#)). The introduction to this special issue draws attention to one particularly crucial methodological tool in the study of contention: political ethnography. People are at the heart of processes of contention. And an ethnographic approach privileges people, focusing research and analysis on lived experiences. Scholars cannot understand moments of mobilization or moments of quiescence without paying attention to how individuals and groups experience processes of repression or mobilization.

The studies in this issue showcase the ways in which adopting ethnographic approaches to varying degrees can contribute to the study of contention. While there is no one agreed-upon definition of ethnography, most (though certainly not all) ethnographic work involves participant observation, which usually takes place through immersion in a field site.¹ This work is often guided by an “ethnographic sensibility” ([Pader, 2006](#); [Schatz 2009](#)) that pushes scholars to see the world through the eyes of their interlocutors and incorporate the processes through which actors ascribe meanings to their social and political experiences. Each article in this issue is, to some degree, ethnographic. Either alone or alongside other methods, each contribution draws on one or more of the central strengths of ethnographic methods to help uncover the processes at work during episodes of repression and/or mobilization. Whether they are using in-depth, iterative interviews to challenge assumptions about how people mobilize against authoritarian rule ([Pearlman, this issue](#)) or against armed groups in civil war ([Masullo, this issue](#)), uncovering hidden processes of resistance and co-optation through interpreting public works of art ([Lerner, this issue](#)), or making sense of state responses to mobilization through participant observation and reading sources with an ethnographic sensibility ([Simmons, this issue](#)), each author challenges taken-for-granted assumptions about the categories that make up the world by trying to see them through the eyes of their interlocutors. Together, these articles showcase how ethnographic approaches can be married with other methods to pose new questions and to view familiar patterns of contention with a new perspective.

In this introduction, we focus on the importance of ethnography in the study of contentious politics, showing how ethnographic methods push us to

both expand the objects of our inquiry and to think newly about what the relevant units of analysis might be. In particular, we show that “what,” “how,” and “why” questions are central to the study of contention and that ethnographic methods are particularly well-suited to answering them. Scholars of contention often consider “what” questions to be fairly straightforward and therefore somewhat uninteresting. Political scientists do not often explore “what happened” in a given protest event, movement, or even cycle of contention as a question in and of itself. Adopting an ethnographic approach can show that “what happened” is rarely straightforward at all. By providing a fuller appreciation of the “what”—uncovering hidden processes, exploring social meanings, and giving voice to unheard stories—ethnography and “ethnography-plus”² approaches not only help us to appreciate the “what” but help us answer the “how” and the “why.” These three contributions of ethnographic approaches to the study of contention are the focus of this article.

We are not alone in highlighting the importance of ethnography to scholarship on contention (e.g., [Auyero, 2007](#); [Auyero & Joseph, 2007](#); [Escobar, 1992](#); [Juris & Khasnabish, 2013, 2015](#); [Plows, 2008](#); [Tarlau, 2019, 2015](#); [Wolford, 2006](#)). Importantly, these voices include not only leading scholars of social mobilization but also scholars who do not practice ethnography themselves. Of particular note is McAdam, Tilly, and Tarrow’s influential work, *Dynamics of Contention*, which called for more careful attention to culture and local knowledge and specifically advocated for the importance of ethnography in this effort ([McAdam et al., 2001](#), pp. 345-6). Their mechanism-based approach also brings to the fore the importance of “how” questions in our studies of repression and contention, including questions of how states deploy repression, how protests are organized, and how challengers understand social movement claims. Ethnography is particularly well-suited to both explore these how questions. It also reminds us that, as Charles Tilly put it, “how is why!” ([Tarrow, 2008](#)) and therefore “how” deserves equal attention, even from scholars for whom causal claims are paramount.

This special issue builds on McAdam, Tilly, and Tarrow’s mechanisms-based approach in two ways. First, the issue shows how “what” and “how” questions are crucial to the study of contentious politics. Second, the issue shows that, by foregrounding these questions, we are better positioned to ask the “why” questions that are at the heart of so much political science research. While the articles that make up this volume use a variety of qualitative methods to bring the importance of “what” and “how” questions to the fore, each author pays close attention to everyday lived experiences, which is one of the hallmarks of ethnographic research.

In this introduction, we build on this commonality to make the case that ethnography is particularly well-suited for “what,” “how,” and “why” questions and show how each of these questions is crucial if we are to

understand the contentious processes that are fundamentally transforming politics and society. These processes of theory generation are crucial for developing new ideas not only about contention but also about politics more broadly. As political scientists increasingly focus on theory testing, ethnographic approaches take on renewed importance in the field as a method that is particular apt for generating new theoretical insights.

Building on the “Dynamics of Contention”

A mechanisms-based approach has “how” questions at its core. But even with McAdam et al.’s emphasis on “how” questions, political scientists have largely remained committed to asking questions emphasizing variation and outcome. In accordance with the tradition of controlled comparisons and paired comparisons (e.g. [Dunning, 2012](#); [Gisselquist, 2014](#); [Slater & Ziblatt, 2013](#); [Snyder, 2001](#); [Tarrow, 2010](#)), many studies focus on when and why certain phenomena or outcomes occur, what mechanisms led to those outcomes, and what explains variation in outcomes. For example, what explains the success of movement A and the failure of movement B? Why was there a full-blown revolution in one region or country and only minor protest in a country with apparently similar conditions? Why did protest occur at a particular moment in time and not earlier? When does the state repress, co-opt, or persuade and why?

All of these questions are important and have yielded findings that illuminate causal dynamics. But as the dynamics of contention framework shows, they are not the only type of questions that can be asked to better understand the struggle between challengers and their opponents. Furthermore, these questions are often best answered and explored when highlighting first-order questions that focus on micro- and meso-level processes without jumping to outcomes or the need for variation. How questions differ fundamentally from variation-finding questions because they invite researchers to discover new variables, processes, and causal connections apart from explaining an observed variation. The subfield’s current emphasis on “explaining the variation” questions comes at the expense of knowledge production in the field (see [Simmons and Smith, n.d.](#)).

The introduction to this special issue builds on the dynamic of contention tradition ([McAdam et al., 2001](#)) with an eye to focusing on how political ethnography is uniquely positioned to help us explore what, how, and why questions at the heart of contentious processes. Doing so helps to fill a gap in the existing study of contentious politics, which has often privileged mechanism-based approaches as part of paired or controlled comparison studies. These approaches, championed by seminal scholars of the subfield, sought to identify common mechanisms that triggered similar processes in two or more countries or cases. Mechanisms were defined as “delimited changes

that alter relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations” (McAdam et al., 2001, p. 24). In short, these approaches sought to identify the complicated chain of events and processes that drive contention.

The dynamics of contention framework, and the emphasis on relational mechanisms in particular, privileged actor-oriented analysis. Yet extensive reliance on secondary sources made it difficult to fully see inside movements and responses to them. Ultimately, even as the foregrounding of mechanisms made critical contributions to the study of contention, the authors found that the concept had become too broad and was too casually deployed (McAdam & Tarrow, 2011, p. 5).³ McAdam and Tarrow suggested that their mechanisms-based approach “is not to reject the idea that cultural and local knowledge shape contention but to propose a strategy for their reconciliation in between the celebration of particularism and the laying down of general laws” (McAdam & Tarrow, 2011, p. 347).

This special issue is a response to this call by embracing the importance of mechanisms while also privileging the voices and experiences of contentious actors and processes “from the inside.” Each of the articles goes beyond a focus on mechanisms alone to offer (a) an explicit focus on how actors make sense of and experience their worlds; (b) contextualization of mechanisms and variables at work in contention by highlighting what they mean to the actors involved; and (c) explanations of how and why unlikely forms of repression and mobilization unfold. In doing so, they showcase how ethnographic approaches make an important contribution to the study of contention specifically and to comparative politics more broadly. These studies generate new ideas about how power operates and politics unfolds. Together, they also highlight one key departure from a sole focus on mechanisms. By embracing ambiguity and contradiction, ethnographic methods challenge us to think outside of the confines of approaches that emphasize the kind of mechanistic reproduction that often dominates the mechanisms literature.

Moreover, this special issue features studies by a younger generation of comparativists exploring contentious processes in non-Western and/or illiberal states through fieldwork that is ethnographic to varying degrees. Ethnography is well-suited to analyzing contention in these contexts, where many state actions and responses are often unseen. Auyero has called this the “gray zone of politics” (Auyero, 2007). Contention in illiberal contexts, including covert repression and violence, is often practiced in these gray zones. To shed light on these hidden processes, ethnography is a crucial methodological tool. Clandestine connections are hard to reveal through surveys or even structured or semi-structured interviews. The objects of our inquiry often require the kinds of relationships and trust that an ethnographer can develop. These relationships allow us to see what people may attempt to hide. As Timothy Pachirat has argued, “Ethnography as a method is particularly unruly,

particularly undisciplined, particularly celebratory of improvisation, bricolage, and serendipity, and particularly attuned to the possibilities of surprise, inversion, and subversion in ways that other methods simply are not” (cited in [Wedeen, 2010](#), p. 256). This positions ethnography as an indispensable method through which to study contentious politics in all of its unpredictability, which is especially salient for illiberal states.

The “What, How, and Why”

This special issue makes the case that questions grounded in descriptive inference can help us explain processes of contention just as much as their causal counterparts, though the puzzle driving the question may look a little different. The answer to “what happened?” not only requires sophisticated, thoughtful analysis (and thus dismissing this kind of work as “mere” description does scholarship a serious disservice) but also plays a critical role in advancing our understandings of contention. Other “what questions” can also be fruitfully analyzed through adopting an ethnographic approach: What form does protest take? What does leadership look like? What kinds of power are at work and to what effect?

These descriptive questions should be elevated to the same level of analytical importance as “what explains the variation” or “under what conditions” questions; the answers help us better understand how movements, and their relationships with targets, develop, grow, and change—all fundamental questions to the study of contentious politics. And yet, in the field of comparative politics, descriptive questions have sometimes been dismissed as lacking in explanatory power because they are not meant to discover causal mechanisms. Although qualitative scholars have long made the case that descriptive questions shed light on local context, uncover or problematize variables, and deliver theoretical leverage ([Schatz, 2009](#)), many comparative scholars continue to gravitate toward the “what explains the variation” question and its variants, and scholars of contention are no exception.⁴

Yet, “what” and “how” questions can help to illuminate and explain social reality more than many political scientists give them credit for (see [Wendt, 1998](#)). In their lightest application, “what” and “how” questions can be *embedded* in a “what explains” or “why” question. For example, “Why do targets of social movement activities respond the way they do?” in two similar mobilization settings ([Simmons](#), this issue) is a classic “what explains” question. However, embedded in this question is another of *how* movements develop the way they do and *what* is happening when movements and targets interact. In this study, one cannot answer the “why do targets respond the way they do?” question without asking, “What do targets understand to be at stake?” The answer to the second question is crucial to answering the first. Furthermore, the second “what” question requires serious analytical work.

In his article for this special issue, Masullo poses a series of “why” questions that also contain elements of the “what” and “how.” He asks two “why” questions, one overarching one about why the form of collective responses to violent groups vary across different communities, and another more specific one about why some communities opt for non-violent dissent (with varying levels of confrontation) as opposed to turning to violent action. Embedded in his research design, however, is a “how” question: How does ideology shape civilian contention in armed conflicts? Using paired case comparisons, he goes beyond drawing a causal link between ideational factors and community responses by showing how, exactly, normative ideas are infused into communities’ consciousness through political entrepreneurs. Notably, Masullo conducted 150 semi-structured interviews, conducted map drawing exercises and memory workshops, and engaged in informal conversations with key informants. The latter draws from an ethnographic tradition in which everyday conversations yield contextualized data on the variable of interest which, in this case, was civilian non-cooperation. Even as Masullo’s approach may have limited the kinds of unexpected encounters and observations that are characteristic of full-fledged immersive ethnography, the range of approaches he employed allowed him to get a fuller picture of how his interlocutors understood their worlds and their actions.

In their fullest application, “what” and “how” questions stand alone to describe a political process about which little is known. For example, accounts of hidden contentious processes such as how people mobilize from scratch (Pearlman, this issue) or how the state co-opts dissidents (Lerner, this issue) that draw on everyday lived experiences and first-person narratives can open the black box of mobilization processes under unlikely conditions (Fu, 2017b). Tracking how various forms of protest change the way participants organize subsequently sheds light on movement dynamics after the initial wave of contention (Bishara, this issue). In short, the “what,” “how,” and “why” questions can be asked in combination or by themselves.

So what are the parts of the “what,” “how,” and “why” questions? For ethnographers, the “what” often refers to generating a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the phenomenon(a), object(s), or political process(es) observed. This kind of analysis may lead to discovering previously “unidentified political objects” (Jourde, 2009), such as an unknown way of organizing under duress, or an everyday practice that was previously thought to be irrelevant to politics. Providing a “thick description” of a mobilization process or of repression tactics requires going beyond picking a commonly accepted dimension of it to study. Most broadly, ethnographers start with questions such as, “What are people doing?”, followed by, “What do those actions or activities mean to the people doing them?”

These questions suggest descriptive answers, but what those answers entail is by no means as straightforward as it appears. They are not about simply

collecting and arranging “facts” but instead seek to understand how people experience and interpret social reality. For example, the answer to a simple question, “What are people doing when they drag their feet?” is a conceptually complicated one. The answer can sometimes be that they are engaging in a quiet act of resistance (Scott, 1985). More recently, scholars have posed similar “what” questions. For example, what did the Ba’athist regime actually know about its citizens (Blaydes, 2018)? What kinds of meanings, identities, and social cleavages are strengthened or constructed in the course of a state-mobilized movement (Ekiert et al., 2020)? “What political work is done in the course of a protest or set of protests and for and by whom?” (Schwedler, 2018, p. 71). What kinds of internal divisions exist within a movement and what impact do they have (Avanza, 2018)? What are racist activists like (Blee, 2003)? What work does ideology do in militant groups (Parkinson, 2021)?

Furthermore, what we think we know is always a product of the time and place in which the “what” was analyzed—in other words, our observations are products of the power structures at work when a piece of scholarship is produced (see Trouillot, 1995). The frameworks, questions, and assumptions that a scholar brings to the field will shape the evidence they seek as well as what they see as significant in the first place. “What” questions are never asked and answered once and for all. For example, when we ask what happened during the Haitian Revolution, the answer is very different depending on whether the analysis took place in 1850, 1900, 1950, or 2000. Scholars writing in each of those historical moments had access to different kinds of information and interpreted that information differently depending on their social and political context and the analytical frameworks dominant at the time. In fact, many French scholars writing in the 19th and early 20th centuries chose to ignore the revolution entirely (Trouillot, 1995). Furthermore, historical and current standards for knowledge production changed in critical ways over that 200-year period. Scholars of contentious politics need to keep asking “what” questions in an effort to update our understandings of mobilization and quiescence.

These “what” questions are also crucial building blocks for other kinds of questions of importance to social scientists. Having developed an understanding of the “what,” scholars can then think about “how” questions. The “how” pushes us to think about the way in which, or by what means, something came to be or take place. This often involves process tracing, but for interpretive ethnographers, it also involves seeking to understand how actors—whether agitators or control agents—interpret events and daily experiences, as well as how they are embedded in larger structures of power relations. Attention to the “how” invites us to look at the micro-questions involved in how actors make (or fail to make) choices that drive movement trajectories (Auyero & Joseph, 2007). The “how” questions can illuminate a little-known political process, such as how people mobilize under duress, or

without many organizational resources. When all the cards are stacked against them, how do weak individuals engage in contention? (Scott, 1985). When civil society groups cannot mobilize people to take to the streets, how do they organize (Fu, 2018)? How do authoritarian regimes prevent protest and implement ambiguous policies that intervene in citizens' everyday lives (Mattingly, 2020)? How have citizens adapted resistance against urban redevelopment to profound political, social, and technical changes (Pasotti, 2020)?

“What, how,” and “why” questions can lead to novel theory generation, a comparative advantage of ethnographic methods. For example, James Scott's theorization of how weak peasants resisted powerholders stemmed from a close, embedded ethnography of a single Malaysian village in a time of vast transition: the introduction of capitalist methods of production which was changing class relations. The question of “how” peasants rebelled against powerholders leads him not only to an empirical finding in the form of “weapons of the weak,” but also to a masterful theorization of ideological domination and resistance. Scott's ethnographic observations from a seventy-household Malaysian village may not be drawn from a representative sample, or involve causal stories based on logics of control. But his theoretical contribution that the weak do not possess false consciousness and in fact engage in observable acts of everyday resistance travels far beyond the field site of Sedaka. It is most certainly a generalizable insight that has informed the thinking of scholars working in every region of the world. In Scott's own words, “The details of this struggle are not pretty, as they entail backbiting, gossip, character assassination, rude nicknames, gestures, and silences of contempt...” (Scott, 1985, p. xvii). All of these micro but observable empirical details constitute the data points which ethnographically inspired researchers use to construct grand theories. This theory of prosaic struggle— built largely from embedded participant observations and listening in on backstage conversations between villagers—has since traveled to many studies of contentious politics.

Furthermore, answers to “how” questions can also provide crucial foundations for scholars interested in the “why.” The “why” question identifies a particular phenomenon or outcome that is puzzling and then seeks to identify a causal process at work. This is the most familiar of the questions to comparative scholars and can be linked to “under what conditions” questions. Indeed, many political science graduate students continue to be encouraged by advisors to develop dissertations with “why” questions at their core and are often dissuaded from framing their projects around “what” or “how” approaches. Many studies of contention also feature the “why” question either alone or in combination with “what” and “when” questions. For example, what kind of protest should we expect and under what conditions (Robertson, 2010)? Why would many poor people run extraordinarily high risks to support

rebels despite the circumstances of civil war and state violence (Wood, 2003)? Why does the Chinese regime remain stable despite rising protests (Chen, 2011)? Why did the Soviet Union collapse (Beissinger, 2002)?

Studies motivated by these questions have driven important advances in our understandings of contention. And they will, no doubt, remain at the center of the field. Our goal is not to discourage “why” questions, but rather to elevate the importance of their “what” and “how” counterparts and to show how the three can and should work together. The “why” questions that are accompanied by “what” and “how” yield rich results because they carefully describe the phenomena that they are trying to explain, often through ethnographic fieldwork.

This Issue: New Questions in Contentious Politics

This special issue showcases five studies of contention in non-Western and/or illiberal states that draw on an ethnographic approach to varying degrees. Each study pays close attention to actors’ lived experiences and tries to make sense of how those actors understand their worlds. Even as some articles do not involve the kind of participant observation that is often expected of an ethnography, they all demonstrate the importance of the careful watching, listening, and challenging assumptions about the world that is the hallmark of ethnography. Participant observation and/or immersion in a field site is not always possible or practical as researchers face constraints in terms of funding and time. In particular, when studying contentious processes involves violence, researchers are often not able to access the field site (see Pearlman, this issue). This can create real limitations on our ability to interpret the words, sounds, texts, and material objects that comprise our data. Something is most certainly lost when we cannot participate in the events we are writing about or immerse ourselves fully in the worlds of our interlocutors. However, such limitations also invite us to look for new sources, new ways of collecting data, and new ways of thinking about how and where meanings are made (see Wedeen, 2019). Furthermore, as many contributors to this special issue note, participant observation can be prohibitively dangerous, particularly in illiberal contexts. It can also be extremely difficult to time research trips around unpredictable cycles of contention. Ultimately, even if we cannot observe processes first-hand, we can still pay attention to lived experiences through accessing people and the field outside of the conflict zone, at a different time, or remotely.

Together, the studies in this special issue answer three important questions, thus advancing the field of contentious politics. First, studies in this issue examine *how and why certain types of repression are deployed, regardless of their outcome for mobilization*. Past research has concluded that the relationship between repression and mobilization is indeterminate (see

Davenport, 2005, pp. xiii-xvi). Given these non-conclusive results, it is important to examine other questions besides the impact of repression on mobilization and vice versa. For instance, what explains variable state responses to social movement activities that appear to be similar (Simmons, this issue)? Why and how do rulers in hybrid regimes use co-optation as a form of repressing dissent as opposed to other methods (Lerner, this issue)? These questions uncover the processes through which rulers in illiberal or hybrid states deploy particular repertoires of control. They do so from an on-the-ground perspective that complements Charles Tilly's key work on regimes and repertoires (Tilly, 2006) and answers the call for more micro-level research on repressive processes and outcomes (Earl, 2011, p. 278).

Second, this issue interrogates *how collective action is activated under unlikely circumstances*. Much of the literature on mobilization in illiberal states examines the extraordinary movements of mass mobilization against authoritarian incumbents (Almeida, 2003; Beissinger, 2002; Bunce & Wolchik, 2011). While these are undoubtedly important, it is also critical to examine how collective action is initiated even before major cycles of contention emerge in repressive or high-risk settings in the first place. For instance, how does large-scale protest get started from scratch in a highly repressive state (Pearlman, this issue)? In states ravaged by civil war, how does ideology influence the form that collective action takes (Masullo, this issue)?

Third, this issue examines *how various forms of protests and mobilizing structures affect movement dynamics*. Protests are often assessed by virtue of movement gains or the "pace of insurgency" (McAdam, 1983). This makes sense, as the goals of protestors are, after all, to make claims on targets (McAdam et al., 2001). However, the specific manifestations of contention can also affect future rounds of mobilization. To this end, articles in this special issue ask: How do various forms of protest change the way participants organize and attempt to expand their movement networks? (Bishara, this issue). These questions are important if we are to understand mobilization as a dynamic process (McAdam et al., 2001, p. 45).

Together, these studies showcase how ethnography can be leveraged to study contentious politics, especially in illiberal and/or non-Western states. They also demonstrate how ethnography is particularly poised to answer the "how," "what," and "why" questions that are central to contentious politics and to comparative analysis, writ large. They reveal different ways of comparing cases beyond "what explains the variation." They show that closely observing subjects, getting knee-deep in following movement trajectories, and paying attention to subjective interpretations can yield insights about existing units or processes of analysis and also lead to the discovery of new ones.

How to Leverage Ethnography in Studying Contention

Social mobilizations and responses to them can create large-scale political transformations. But we cannot understand these transformations if we do not explore the individual lives and collective experiences that serve as their foundation. To understand why actors join a protest or stay home, choose a particular tactic or target and not another, and make particular claims and not others, we have to understand how they make sense of their worlds. We also have to be open to incorporating confusion, contradiction, and ambiguity into our analyses. Ethnography, with its attention to lived experiences and meaning-making practices, is particularly well-suited to help scholars of contention explore these questions and to do so in a way that sheds crucial light on how and why contention shapes our world as it does.

Answering the “What” Questions

Designed to yield a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of what is happening on the ground, ethnography both helps us to answer the “what” questions and shows us why the “what” questions are so important. When scholars engage in the kind of thick description often employed by ethnographers, they are not just describing what meets the eye, but what that action or phenomenon *means* or *signifies* to the different actors involved. For example, masses of people taking to the streets with signs appears to be a protest on the surface. However, a thick description would require analyzing what those actions mean to the protestors, the bystanders, and control agents alike. Doing so might require interviewing as well as participant observation in order to delve beyond the “public transcripts” (Scott, 1990)—the on-stage scripts (the shouts and slogans) of protestors. It might also require attention to built or other environments and how they shape the possibilities and meanings of protest. What demands are really behind their slogans? What do the claims mean to different people participating in the protest? What is contested about those meanings? How might the location or lay-out of a place of protest affect interactions and relationships among protesters themselves and/or among protesters and targets?

One of the most important contributions that an ethnographic approach to “what” questions makes is in the recognition that “what is happening” in a given time or place may not be as straightforward as it seems. When Auyero (2007) asks, “What was going on?” in the December 2001 lootings in Buenos Aires, he acknowledges that developing any understanding of the lootings requires an admission that newspaper accounts or popular stories provide important information, but that they offer only one or a few perspectives. Through a willingness to start with the “what” question, and to try to answer that “what” through ethnography, Auyero (2007, p. 5) is able to reveal the

“clandestine, concealed connections that were central in making the lootings.” His research uncovers the importance of political entrepreneurs, ultimately demonstrating the “intersections and interactions between routine politics and popular violence” (Auyero, 2007, p. 6). This insight advances scholarship on contention in important ways—but it is only possible because Auyero starts by admitting that answering the “what” question is a challenging, analytical task that deserves attention and elevation.

Ethnography can be leveraged to analyze the “what” in contentious processes by documenting everyday routines and recognizing consequential silence. By knowing the familiar, ethnographers can recognize “small-scale ruptures” in routine (see Schwedler, 2018). Scholars can then probe the work that those innovations might be doing. But it is only through knowing the routine—asking, “What happens here everyday?”—that a researcher knows when interlocutors have deviated from it. And it is only through understanding how interlocutors make sense of their worlds that a researcher can understand the political work that these deviations do (see Schwedler, 2018). Similarly, by asking the “what is happening” kind of question, ethnographers also ask themselves what is *not* happening. What questions are not being asked by activists or state representatives or leaders? Who is not at the protest today/which state representatives are not responding? What topics were not discussed? What actions were not taken? Recognizing and reading those silences requires immersion in a field site. And they are indispensable if we are to begin to understand what is happening during contentious processes.

An ethnographic approach to answering these questions is useful regardless of whether we are studying movements where the worldview espoused by activists is profoundly different from that of the researcher (e.g., see Avanza, 2018; Blee, 2003; Hochschild, 2016) or if we are studying a community we might call our own. Ethnography compels researchers to recognize their preconceptions—of themselves and of others—and to wrestle with them. In most cases, scholars will never see the world through the eyes of their interlocutors, but they can try to understand how interlocutors make sense of their worlds. This starts with asking “what” questions, which can transform into “how” questions and then “why” questions. Blee’s (2003) work on women in racist hate groups provides an excellent example. By asking “what” and related “who” questions—what does organized racism consist of, who joins organized racism, and what are racist activists like—Blee reveals diverse trajectories and experiences that are surprising to those of us who are not inside these organizations. Without understanding this diversity, we are often tempted to caricature and simplify—both grave errors if we want to work to better understand and combat organized racism. Avanza (2018) makes a similarly important contribution at the organizational level with her analysis of pro-life movements in Italy—without asking “what” questions about movement organizations, we often make erroneous assumptions about

movement cohesion. By asking “what” questions, we can reveal movements that appear unified to actually be fractured and contested, rife with consequential internal division and conflict.

An ethnographic approach to “what” questions can also help us understand a movement’s *impact* in important ways. When Schwedler asks, “What political work is done in the course of a protest or a set of protests and for and by whom?” (Schwedler, 2018, p. 71) and uses ethnography to explore it, she shows small-scale protest can do consequential political work. The small-scale protests in Jordan that capture Schwedler’s attention might not appear as events to be studied—other than, perhaps, to be coded as an incidence of protest in a large-n analysis. But Schwedler shows how they do important political work in their own right—work that would be missed or overlooked without ethnographic analysis. She shows how protests do more than build a movement. They can also help to both create space for speech and produce understandings about how political dissent can be expressed (see also Steinhoff, 2007). As these examples show, an ethnographic approach to “what” questions about contention is important in and of itself. But it is also a crucial building block for all of the other kinds of questions that scholars of mobilization want to ask. And if we get the “what” wrong, we are likely to get the rest of our analysis wrong, too.

Discovering the “How” Through Ethnography

Second, the ethnographic approach is useful for answering the “how” questions. Scholars of mobilization have long been interested in repertoires of contention (e.g., Della Porta, 2013; Tilly, 2006), and “how” questions are ideal for exploring them (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). How do citizens make claims on the state? How do social movement organizers organize? When we study patterns of collective claim-making, we must bring together the micro and the macro and pay attention to how they constitute one another. As Auyero and Joseph argue (2007, p. 4), “The repertoire, then, is not merely a set of *means* for making claims but also an array of meanings that arise relationally, in struggle; meanings that, as Geertz puts it, are ‘hammered out in the flow of events.’”

Ethnographically grounded “how” questions can also help reveal what we should be studying in the first place. Because ethnography encourages us to think differently about the objects of our analysis, new “units” or political processes emerge as relevant when we use ethnographic tools. For example, through closely observing illegal labor activists in China, Fu (2018) discovered a new and unconventional form of organized contention: “mobilizing without the masses.” On the surface, this form of contention resembles “weapons of the weak” (Scott, 1985) in that it is wielded by individuals or small groups. However, through embedded ethnography which entailed a

combination of interviews and long-term participant observation, she discovered that this form of contention was actually a form of “disguised collective action” (Fu, 2017a) which hid organized mobilization behind a façade of individualized contention.

Similarly, in her contribution to this special issue, Pearlman shows how analysis of personal narratives can help us identify previously unseen mobilization processes. Over the course of six years, Pearlman conducted more than 400 interviews with displaced Syrians in multiple countries. In creating an open space for interviewees to describe and reflect upon their experiences, she was able to draw out stories and interpretations of mobilization processes during the 2011 Syrian uprising. There are important limitations to using personal narratives about protests that are recorded years after a protest takes place. Post-hoc narratives might not describe the facts of an event accurately, memories might be distorted by social desirability bias, or even harden into social scripts. However, by understanding these limitations and incorporating them into her analysis, and then complementing her interviews with immersion in Syrian refugee camps and involvement in the daily lives of the people she interviewed, Pearlman was able to approach each narrative with an ethnographic sensibility. In practice, she was able to bring an understanding of what words, phrases, and actions meant to her interlocutors, which rendered a richer study of mobilization processes. As a result of these varied and contextual interviews, she theorized a new process, which she termed “mobilizing from scratch” (Pearlman, this issue). These studies gave rise to a new unit of analysis that would not have been possible had a researcher not put aside her own questions and undertaken to listen carefully to research subjects talk about their own lives on their own terms. As these examples show, narratives are critical for answering “how” questions, not only because they yield empirical detail about an unknown phenomenon but also because they can lead to the discovery of “unidentified political objects” (Jourde, 2009).

Ethnography is also useful for exploring the “how” in often hidden processes of state repression. How does an authoritarian state carry out repression of dissidents? How do citizens experience and react to repression?⁵ One can study state repression via number of imprisonments, instances of torture, campaign cycles, or the disbanding of popular protests, and these are important contributions.⁶ But an ethnographic approach can also uncover new processes through which control agents exert power, as well as the subjective experience of living under repression. States carry out repression not only through the familiar repertoire of arrests and riot policing, but also through rituals and celebrations, normally considered the terrain of anthropologists (Jourde, 2009; Wedeen, 1999). Likewise, the “how do people live under repression” question may seem like it has a simple answer: with fear or intrepidity. But, as many classic studies have shown, the reality depends on the specific context and often lies somewhere in between compliance and

rebellion. For Malaysian peasants, resistance can be documented in the way they address their landlords behind their backs (Scott, 1985). For Syrians living under Assad's rule, dissimulation comes in the form of behaving "as if" they believed in their ruler's personality cult (Wedeen, 1999).

The question of how states repress is ripe for ethnographic analysis. In her contribution to this special issue, Lerner argues that the opaque nature of authoritarian and hybrid states such as Russia under Putin makes it particularly important to understand *how* incumbents co-opt individuals of influence via a longitudinal perspective (see also Malesky & Schuler, 2010, p. 482). Based on a decade of fieldwork involving observations of graffiti in public spaces combined with expert interviews, Lerner examines how the Russian state between 2012 and 2018 co-opted political graffiti artists. Through photographic documentation of street graffiti and how it changed over time, her study finds that the Russian state, via the Ministries of Culture and Interior, in addition to other local institutions, bought off graffiti artists and successfully replaced critical public art with pro-Kremlin artwork. Lerner immersed herself in daily life first in Moscow generally and then with a community of graffiti artists, mapping out different graffiti districts in Moscow, and conducting longitudinal and multi-sited observations of symbols and discourse. It is through this embedded ethnography that Lerner arrives at the finding that co-optation need not involve state security; paying off artists and societal leaders is sufficient. This finding complements a wealth of studies that have examined why hybrid regimes engage in co-optation (e.g., Robertson, 2010, p. 4; Koesel, 2014, p. 3) by honing in on the specific methods the state uses to accomplish such a repressive mission.

Importantly, "how" questions can also draw our attention to those structures and forces *outside of a movement* that shape contention. For example, when Blee and Currier (2007) ask how national elections affect social movements, they uncover the ways in which group culture plays a critical role in determining collective responses to elections, which, in turn, impacts a movement's trajectory. The work then sheds light on broader questions about the relationship between states and social movements. Similarly, when Schwedler (2020, p. 71) asks, "[How have] changes to the built environment inadvertently constrained or limited possibilities for protest?", she focuses our attention on how structures outside of a movement influence movement dynamics. By taking an ethnographic approach to space, Schwedler shows how space both creates and constrains possibilities for protest. In short, ethnography can reveal a new "how" outside of the movement itself that would likely remain obscure or invisible otherwise.

Finally, ethnography can also answer the question of *how movements sustain themselves* after the eruption of an episode. Internal movement outcomes is an understudied phenomenon as many studies gravitate toward the most dramatic periods of social movements when people take to the streets

in protest. In her contribution to the special issue, Bishara uses ethnography, situated in a “diverse case methods” design (see [Seawright & Gerring, 2008](#)), to examine how duration and geographic scope can affect a movement’s aftermath. Conducting extensive field research and interviews with “ethnographic sensibility” ([Schatz, 2009](#)) in four different “semi-authoritarian” countries in the Middle East, Bishara was able to reconstruct protest events and decipher how different protest actions affected internal social movement dynamics. This involved interviewing protest participants on the daily routines of their protest, including seemingly apolitical habits such as sleeping, cooking, and cleaning. The timing of the protests and the risks involved in their direct observation prohibited Bishara from conducting participant observation at the time of the protest themselves. Even as this limited the kinds of questions she could ask, Bishara was able to immerse herself in the context in which the protests occurred after the fact, allowing her to ask new questions about the construction of collective memories and the political work that the protests could do after the fact. This grounded research led to the discovery of what she terms “the generative power of protest” (in this issue).

Leveraging Ethnography to Answer the “Why”

Third, ethnographic approaches can also be used to answer “why” questions in contentious politics. Many political scientists assume ethnographic work is not well-suited to causal analysis, and many ethnographers eschew causal claims. However, ethnography is well-positioned to ask “why” questions, make causal claims, and advance general arguments (see [Wedeen, 2010](#)). This is a less traditional application of ethnography, since many ethnographers think about causal arguments and generalizability differently than scholars who use other research methods ([Schatz, 2009](#), pp. 10–11; [Simmons & Smith, forthcoming](#)). When ethnographers think about how their research travels, they are likely not claiming that the relationships identified in one field site will travel unchanged to another. Rather, they may claim that the theoretical and conceptual discoveries of one context can have relevance to another site.

For ethnographers looking to make causal claims, a causal story might not entail specific variables leading to a set of outcomes but may instead be about how particular structures or conditions helped to produce actions (see [Fujii, 2008](#)). By gaining first-hand insight into the subjective lenses of contentious actors and consciously thinking about the connections between the unique and the typical as they do, scholars can use ethnography to tell causal stories that travel across time and place. For example, figuring out why poor people would run high risks to support rebels required extended participant observation combined with interviews and map-making workshops ([Wood, 2003](#)). Similarly, ethnographic methods revealed how attention to the meanings that

grievances take on can play a critical role in our understandings of why people mobilize (Simmons, 2014). Both of these studies not only offer causal accounts but also generate generalizable insights.

Ethnography is particularly important in our efforts to answer “why” questions because it requires that we take the complexity and messiness of everyday life seriously. In the service of simplicity, causal analysis often encourages scholars to think in categories that run roughshod over the contradictions of social reality. By putting those contradictions front and center, ethnographic causal analysis may appear less determinate than other approaches: ethnographers rarely use the language of “necessary” or “sufficient” causes and largely eschew predictive claims. But this does not make the answer to the “why” any less convincing. Take, for example, Wolford’s (2010) work on Brazil’s Landless Workers’ Movement (MST). Among many questions, Wolford asks: Why did the MST lose power in a region that was a stronghold? Through ethnographic research and analysis, including participant observation and interviews, Wolford shows how within any one movement, there are varying types of engagement and attachment, as well as varying intensity levels. In doing so, she reminds us that the “outcomes” that interest us are often not as clearly defined as researchers might like. As she argues, “The thick line between inside and outside that social movements draw for strategic reasons ... are rarely—if ever—mirrored on the ground” (Wolford, 2007, p. 17).

Both movement membership and movement strength are not as cut and dry as they appear to be—and only ethnography can reveal these tensions. This, in turn, pushes us to think differently about the questions we ask. Wolford shows that putting the MST in Água Preta into a category of “movement failure” does not capture the dynamics on the ground. Instead, scholars should be looking at the MST’s activities in the region to understand the ways in which even the same activities, depending on the perspective one takes, may be understood as contributing to movement strength and movement weakness at the same time. Though ethnography, Wolford answers a “why” question and complicates the question itself in consequential ways.

In her article in this volume, Simmons shows how the meanings that are uncovered through ethnographic research can be critical in our efforts to explore “why” questions. She asks: Why do targets of social movement activities respond to movements in the ways they do? Through a study of two cases of social mobilization, one in response to water privatization in Bolivia and the other in response to rising corn prices in Mexico, she finds that targets’ perceptions of social movement claims can be a critical component of the answer. The article argues that a target’s understanding of a social movement’s claims helps shape its response, which, in turn, shapes the evolution of the social movement. In each case, differences in how public authorities understood the movements’ claims help explain why they reacted in starkly

different ways to the emerging movements. Through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and an ethnographic approach to archival materials, Simmons is able to show how the meanings that social movement grievances took on for state officials charged with movement response shaped their policy choices. Where officials appreciated the symbolic value of the good at stake, they acted quickly to curtail resistance. Where officials failed to grasp those meanings, they dismissed the potential for widespread mobilization and inadvertently accelerated movement growth.

Like Bishara and Pearlman, Simmons was unable to observe the protests (and responses to them) as they unfolded. She was constrained in the questions she could ask and the data available to her because she was not in the meetings where officials made key decisions. She relied instead on their accounts of what happened and why they made the choices they did. But she need not, and does not, take those accounts at face value. Instead, she drew on participant observation with policy makers and social movement participants post-facto to try to make sense of what people said during interviews and why, and the meanings those words, as well as the stated beliefs and actions they describe, take on. Ultimately, through this careful approach to data collection and analysis, Simmons's study shows not only how ethnography can help to answer "why" questions but also that an ethnographic sensibility can be indispensable to the process.

Finally, ethnography can help us to answer one of the most difficult questions in contentious politics—why people *do not* mobilize.⁷ The question is difficult not because a lack of mobilization is particularly puzzling, but rather because it is over-determined. There are so many reasons not to take the risks involved in mobilization, and untangling which reasons are at work is a daunting challenge. Through ethnographic research and analysis, [Wedeen \(2019\)](#) took on a particularly challenging subject: civil war in Syria. By embracing the ambiguities and confusions of Syrian life during the early stages of the civil war, Wedeen is able to highlight the important role of ambivalence. By focusing on Syrians in the middle—those Syrians who supported neither the Assad regime nor the rebels—Wedeen takes us to the question at the heart of the survival of the Assad regime: Why did so many Syrians choose *not* to rebel? Her work shows how the inability of some Syrians to "entertain the possibility of a salutary alternative to what they could admit was a problematic status quo" ([Wedeen, 2019](#), p. 41) helped to drive their quiescence. The research reveals how "an ideological structural of disavowal can work politically to stifle transformation" ([Wedeen, 2019](#), p. 12) and how ambivalence can be central to maintaining the status quo. Wedeen shows the crucial role of ethnographic analysis, including of cultural products—films, videos, television serials, comedies, and online content—in

elucidating the ideological contours of the Syrian revolution and explaining why the Assad regime held onto power.

Ethnography allows us to “record the trajectory of group life as it unfolds, capturing the fits and starts—the messiness—of social interaction” (Blee & Currier, 2007, p. 162). By capturing this messiness, ethnography reminds us that the “what” is not always as straightforward as it seems, that the “how” can reveal crucial processes at work, and that even the “why” questions require attention to everyday lived experiences. Ultimately, ethnography both reminds us of the importance of the “what” and “how” questions in contentious politics and is uniquely well-positioned to answer not only these questions but also the “why” questions that drive so much of our inquiry in contentious politics.

Conclusion: Implications for Studying Illiberal States

This special issue illustrates that “what,” “how,” and “why” questions can expand the repertoire of puzzles in comparative politics and that ethnography (alone or paired) is an important method for answering them. Beyond contentious politics, ethnography can also be particularly valuable when studying illiberal states, where political processes are often hidden, survey data are unreliable, and archival material hard to access.⁸ The current decade has witnessed the global rise of illiberal regimes and the backsliding of established democracies. Far from ushering in the “end of history” (Fukuyama, 1992), a renewed era of authoritarianism appears to have dawned. In 2018, 55% of countries in the world were considered to be not free or partly free, marking a 12-year “global slide” since 2006 (Abramowitz, 2018). Democracies are said to be in peril (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018), and the latest wave of social movements in the Middle East did little to resuscitate democracy (Ketchley, 2017). With the emergence of illiberal leviathans such as China and Russia, the persistence of authoritarianism in the Middle East, and the fragility of democracies in Latin America and Africa, it is imperative to re-examine the dynamics of contention.

Doing this kind of ethnographically inspired research in illiberal states requires special attention to safety and research ethics. Research environments where protestors are often harassed, jailed, or punished by other means can be dangerous terrains for both researchers and subjects. It is especially important to figure out where the “red lines” of political acceptability are by speaking with local scholars and interlocutors (Shih, 2015, pp. 20-22). It is equally important to protect one’s data both in the field and when publishing articles by not disclosing one’s fieldnote publicly (Cramer, 2015, pp. 17-20). To the extent that interview data are published as an appendix, it should be done with an eye to balancing the need for reporting the sampling frame, saturation, length, format, and other criteria with the need to protect subjects’ identities (see Bleich and Pekkanen 2013). As many scholars have argued the standards for data transparency should be different for qualitative and intensive fieldwork projects

because replicability—the justification for data transparency—is not desirable for interpretive work or for certain kinds of interview research (Cramer, 2015, pp. 17-20; Tripp, 2018). In authoritarian research, it is especially advisable to take precautions by assessing risk before, during, and post-research.⁹

Such challenges should not bar researchers from adopting an “ethnographic sensibility” (Schatz, 2009) by putting one’s ears close to the ground and documenting both “public and hidden transcripts” (Scott, 1990). Doing so can yield contextualized and missing data. Furthermore, adopting such a sensibility is not rocket science—it simply requires scholars to be attuned to the meanings behind political objects and processes (Simmons & Smith, 2017). This is particularly important to the study of illiberal states, where “democracy” and “protest” or “repression” may carry entirely different meanings than in other settings. To leave this kind of meaning-deciphering work to anthropologists or sociologists would be a missed opportunity for political scientists. Instead, we need to dig and dig deep into the social reality by broadening the range of puzzles we ask about and embracing whatever method is most suitable for analyzing them, including political ethnography.

In short, this special issue showcases both that “what” and “how” questions can be worthwhile in their own right and that they play indispensable roles in answering “why” and “under what conditions” questions. These can identify processes or variations that were previously unknown or thought to be insignificant, such as variations in how different regimes deploy repression at the ground level, or how authoritarian legacies affect movements after regime change. How a social phenomenon occurs can be just as important as why it occurs or the way it does. It is a central piece in our collective effort to understand and explain social reality.

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Notes

1. Ethnographies that center place and space, including institutions and the built environment, are increasingly common and are making crucial contributions to our understandings of politics generally and contention specifically (e.g., see Pachirat,

- 2013; Schwedler, 2020; Lerner, this issue). While these works might not require participant observation, they do tend to involve immersion in one or more field sites.
2. See Sidney Tarrow's conclusion to the special issue.
 3. Mechanisms that the authors identified included identity shift, attribution of opportunity and threat, the framing of contention, and actor constitution, among others (McAdam et al., 2001).
 4. See Tilly (1984) for an excellent discussion of the limitations of focusing solely on "variation-seeking" questions and analysis.
 5. Davenport and Inman (2012) have argued that scholars know relatively little about repression's impact on social and political phenomenon.
 6. See, for example, Blaydes (2018); Pan and Siegel (2020); Truex (2019).
 7. Tilly and Tarrow also make this point in *Contentious Politics* (2015).
 8. See O'Brien and Stern (2008) for how to study contention in China, an illiberal state.
 9. See Jacobs et al. (2021) for a broader discussion of how scholars approach questions of transparency in qualitative research.

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