Concluding remarks: Conceptual distinctions for the study of political altruism

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Conceptual Distinctions for the Study of Political Altruism

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This book opened with a number of research questions about the solidarity movement: Is this movement a genuine political expression of altruism? Being potentially distinct from other types of contentious collective action, does it follow its own specific logic of mobilization? And if yes, in what ways is it distinct from other movements whose members stand to benefit directly from the outcomes of their involvement? Some of these questions (as well as others) have been explicitly addressed in the previous chapters. Others have remained with more discretion in the background, but have nevertheless informed the discussion. My aim in this brief concluding chapter is not to make a synthesis of all that has been written in the preceding contributions. This would be both impractical and useless. Instead, I will try to bring to the fore a number of conceptual issues that underlie those analyses. It seems to me that five such issues are worth discussing here in the form of conceptual distinctions: charitable/political, national/transnational, structure/action, private/public, and self-interested/altruistic. Each of them covers aspects regarding the definition as well as the explanation of our subject matter. As will soon become clear, some of them partly overlap. Yet I think it is helpful to keep them separate from an analytical point of view. The first two distinctions are more “substantial” and refer mostly to the solidarity movement as a collective political actor; the last three tackle more “theoretical” issues about political altruism.
Charitable/Political

In her introductory chapter, Florence Passy has defined the actions carried out by participants in the solidarity movement as collective, altruistic, and political. Although this operational definition is helpful as a starting point, it must not prevent us from seeing that the solidarity movement is the outcome of the interplay between individual involvement based on charitable motivations and collective interactions in the political realm. People who are engaged in the solidarity movement often do so not on the basis of political motives, but rather guided by the goal of bringing relief to those who suffer from some kind of injustice. This is particularly true for the so-called voluntary sector, which is an area of participation largely alien from political forms of civic involvement. Here the willingness to engage in what Wuthnow (1991) has called "acts of compassion" rather than political fervor is what brings people to become involved.

This distinction between charitable and political aims is reflected in the movement’s organizational basis. The two objectives are not mutually exclusive and are often carried by the same organization. Yet the most politicized areas of solidarity are to be found in those organizations that emerged starting from the late 1960s and which have contributed to the renewal of civic participation in the new social movements. On the other hand, the older organizations often remain tied to a more traditional type of direct and "neutral" intervention. Thus, there is a sort of "division of tasks" within the contemporary solidarity movement between organizations that focus on the provision of services and those that target the authorities and public opinion in an attempt to influence government policies and to bring about a collective awareness of issues such as human rights, development aid, immigration, and antiracism. This distinction holds at both the national and the international level, for both routine interventions and emergency situations such as civil wars. Here the distinction proposed by Simone Baglioni between advocacy and operational organizations is particularly relevant. The former act on behalf of unprivileged or endangered populations in the political realm, whereas the latter specialize in humanitarian aid and hence intervene directly in the field. By combining these two kinds of activity, the solidarity movement is able to provide immediate relief in situations of crisis while at the same time to help reestablish collective identities and put the needs of those populations higher in the political and public agendas.

The charitable/political distinction evokes the difference between religious and secular tendencies within the solidarity movement, which has emerged in some of the chapters in this volume, most notably in Costanzo Ranci's discussion of the Italian voluntary sector. As he points out, religious beliefs and values are one of the principal causes of participation in nonprofit organizations and activities. In Italy—but not only there—for example, there is a
dense network of ties linking voluntary organizations to the Catholic world. Many of the people involved in nonprofit organizations and activities have a religious background. More generally, many of the members of organizations active in the field of solidarity are recruited among those who have deep religious beliefs. The Christian emphasis on helping the other person and giving assistance to suffering people provides a powerful “cultural tool kit” (Swidler 1986) from which to draw the resources to be invested in the movement. Of course, it is not the only one, but one that has often played a crucial role in recruiting new members and participants. As pointed out by Passy, the solidarity movement draws from three cultural traditions: the Christian cosmology, the humanist component of the Enlightenment, and the socialist tradition. Each provides the movement and the organizations active in it with crucial cultural and symbolic resources, but also with social, material, and human ones.

**National/Transnational**

The contributions in this book reflect the multilevel action scope of the solidarity movement. We have specifically focused on the national and transnational levels. The five chapters in part II examine the activities of the movement as well as its interactions with other social and political actors within the national state. The relationship between the movement and the state itself is particularly important. As various studies of social movements have shown during the past three decades or so (for example, Kitschelt 1986; Kriesi et al. 1995; McAdam 1982; McAdam et al. 1996a; Tarrow 1998; Tilly 1978), state institutions both set constraints and provide opportunities for collective action, hence also for altruistic collective action. This can be most explicitly seen in Paul Statham’s contribution to the volume. He turns our attention away from individual motivations and incentives to focus on the sets of political opportunities for the solidarity movement in a political issue field in which much altruistic mobilization arises: immigration and ethnic relations. Yet he makes us aware that opportunities are not only institutional. They also have a cultural and discursive side, which include access to legitimating discourses, to alliance networks, and to public support in the information media and more generally in the public space. In this sense, the selective incentives for mobilization pointed out by Olson (1965) and by much work in social movements after him are not given as such, but depend on the political opportunities provided by the state’s policy stance toward the beneficiary group. I will deal more in detail below with Olson’s theory of collective action and its relevance for the issues addressed in this book.

In spite of the continuing saliency of the national level, clearly the solidarity movement is among those which put the greater emphasis on the interna-
tional and the transnational levels. The five chapters that form part III of the book focus on these levels, each highlighting a specific aspect that contributes to making this movement an important actor on a world scale. The issues raised by the solidarity movement lend themselves to a transnationalization of activism. Supporting or fighting a given political regime in the so-called Third World, providing relief to populations who are victims of civil wars, raising funds to help people in danger of starvation due to famine in particularly underdeveloped zones of the planet, acting in favor of political and war refugees, and so forth are all activities that presuppose an action scope that goes well beyond the national borders. But it is not only because of the nature of the issues it addresses that the solidarity movement becomes a transnational social movement, to use the formulation of Ivana Eterovic and Jackie Smith. As their and Baglioni’s chapters in particular illustrate, we are witnessing the emergence of a new dimension of solidarity, one we may call global to the extent that it begins and ends on a world scale. While traditional international activism, like that described by Sarah Soule, starts at the national or even at the local level, the new transnationalism largely transcends that scope. The rock-for-a-cause events described by Christian Lahusen seem to me a clear example of this. To be sure, the traditional internationalist pattern which Giddens (1990) points to as a core feature of the process of globalization, indicates that global solidarity action will gain importance and centrality in the future.

Local and national activities, however, will not disappear. Quite the contrary, globalization is also likely to bring up new problems, or make old ones more salient, which must be dealt with nationally or even locally. While the solidarity movement takes on a transnational character, this does not necessarily mean that its activities are going to become global in the sense of being conducted on a world scale. Its mobilization can also be transnational—that is, go beyond the borders of national states—in that it refers to the increasing importance of regions, much the same as the process of European integration has brought to the fore regional cooperation and exchanges. Immigration is an example. Thus, the contemporary (and most likely the future) solidarity movement is characterized by a multilevel action scope in which local, national, and transnational (at both the world and the regional level) activities are all part of this type of civic participation.

Structure/Action
Involvement in the solidarity movement, as any other type of collective action, can be studied from different points of view. In her introductory chapter, Passy distinguishes among rationalist, culturalist, and structuralist accounts of
political altruism, stressing both the strengths and weaknesses of each. It would be useless to go back to them at this stage. What is worth recalling, however, is that the study of political altruism must take into account several levels of analysis. The various chapters in this volume reflect this multilevel character of the study of the solidarity movement and political altruism. The distinction among micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of analysis (Gerhards and Rucht 1992) can be applied to this area of research as well. First of all, as Olivier Filliéule argues in his methodological reflections based on the French case, it is important to start with a micro-sociological analysis that focuses on individual reasons and motivations, and hence depart from a substantialist definition of groups as undivided units. People come to be engaged in altruistic actions from different personal trajectories and with different social and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, to look at these individual characteristics provides us with a key to understand why people act altruistically. At the same time, however, he points to the need to anchor individual histories in the social and associative contexts in which they are located. On the one hand, it is important to study the work of solidarity movement organizations, at both the national and the transnational level. What kinds of claims they make in the public space, how they recruit their staff and members, what relationships they entertain among them, as well as with other types of associations—these and related questions must capture our attention, and they did so in this book. On the other hand, participation in the solidarity movement is facilitated by preexisting social networks. Finally, we must not forget that movement organizations are embedded in a larger institutional, cultural, and discursive context which sets the opportunities and constraints for altruistic collective action. As I mentioned earlier, the concept of opportunity structure, as it was developed in social movement research, proves all its value here. The chapter by Statham, in particular, is there to remind us of the importance of looking at the solidarity movement in its interactions with social and political institutions which can either stimulate or discourage its mobilization.

When it comes to theories and explanations, these three levels of analysis, in a way, translate into the classical dualism of structure and action. Although some scholars have replaced the notion of dualism with that of duality to signal that structure and action presuppose one another (Giddens 1984), the sources and origins of human agency have long been the object of a relentless controversy between objectivists and subjectivists, between methodological individualists and institutionalists or cultural analysts, between structural theorists and action theorists. Political altruism does not escape this theoretical challenge.

Although trade-offs between perspectives that focus on structure and perspectives that focus on action are inevitable, solutions to this tension in the field of contentious politics exist and have indeed been proposed (Lichbach 1998). A possible way out of the dead end of rationalist voluntarism and of
both cultural and structural determinism consists in examining the interactions between individual and groups which lead one to display an altruistic behavior. The chapters that form this volume have shown that political altruism is largely the product of social relations. The relational nature of the solidarity movement is most clearly visible in Charles Tilly’s contribution. He rightly points out that an *ex ante* definition of a behavior as altruistic presupposes that people anticipate individual costs and benefits, and that to explain altruistic collective action we should turn away from *ex ante* decisions toward relational processes that promote self-sacrifice. Fillieule makes a similar point when he suggests that we would be better to avoid taking notions such as solidarity as relevant categories for the analysis. Finally, Passy and Marco Giugni have attempted to show empirically that political altruism, as any other form of contentious politics, is a product of social relations. But, although perhaps less explicitly, the other chapters as well have pointed to the need of looking at social relations and interactive dynamics if we are to understand how altruistic collective action emerges and is sustained over time.

**Private/Public**

Any analysis of social movements entails, explicitly or implicitly, a discussion of the relation between the private and the public. Of course, when it comes to collective action, the mother of all discussions in this respect is that spurred by Mancur Olson’s *Logic of Collective Action*. Not surprisingly, many of the chapters in this volume refer to Olson’s seminal book or take his work as a point of departure. At the same time, they stress the limits of an analysis of altruistic behaviors simply in terms of individual motivations and selective incentives. According to Olson, collective action for the production of common—that is, public—goods is very unlikely in the absence of selective incentives that yield certain private gains. For the marginal gain of participants is very small and, moreover, they will benefit from these goods even if they do not act, thanks to the action of others. In such a situation, the strategy of “free riding” prevails. Hence the need of selective incentives for action. This is the essence of the theory, at least as it was applied to the mobilization by social movements.

As Passy points out in the introduction, the important point for our present purpose is that this dilemma of collective action is all the more salient in the case of the solidarity movement, which in its pure definition is aimed at producing a public good from which only those who do not participate can benefit. Ruud Koopmans speaks quite aptly of a double dilemma of collective action. Mobilization, for the reasons I just recalled, is unlikely and hindered among people who benefit from the public good thus produced. Yet it should be all the more difficult when participants will not benefit from that good
even if they act. In such a situation, selective incentives—or, as Koopmans suggests, selective frames—must not only induce people to act for a public good from which they will enjoy benefits, but also to act for an altruistic common aim. In the end, however, it might well be possible that this theory of collective action is simply not applicable, as such, to groups that mobilize with altruistic and philanthropic aims, or at least, as Olson himself was inclined to believe, is insufficient to explain these cases. But it may be inapplicable not for the reasons he evokes, namely, because “mass movements” are characterized by a “low degree of rationality” or because the relationship between the interests of members and those of the organization are particularly “rich and obscure.” Rather, the theory is perhaps incomplete to account for these situations because acting collectively to defend the interests, rights, and identities of other individuals and groups introduces an element that changes the logic of collective action aimed at producing public goods.

To go back more directly to the contributions in this volume, I see three principal ways in which the private/public dialectic has surfaced. The first way is the one I just discussed, that is, the relationship between private interests and public goods. The main line of inquiry here concerns the question of how private aims and concerns can be overstepped in order for people to be able to engage in collective actions for the production of common goods. The second way, mentioned, for example, by Tilly, involves the concept of identity. As he points out, contentious politics imply the public representation of identity. When people make public claims in the name of their identities, an interactive process occurs in which we observe not only the politicization of those identities, but also their “publicization” in the interpenetration of the private and the public. Finally, Ranci’s contribution points to a third way of articulating this conceptual distinction. The area of voluntary organizations and practices is often indicated as the “third sector” between—or rather beyond—the state and the market. Against the classical view that tends to set in opposition the private (economic, market-oriented) sector and the public (political, government-oriented) sector, the past few decades have witnessed the rise of an area of civic participation and political action that has a private nature but a public aim. This area of civic participation is part of that sphere of social interaction between the economy and the state which forms the civil society (Cohen and Arato 1992) and which includes the solidarity movement as a crucial component of it.

Self-Interested/Altruistic

From the point of view of individual participation in collective action, the distinction between the private sphere and the public sphere is partly reflected in that between self-interest and altruism, which in the final analysis is the
rouge of this book. Speaking of Olson and the challenges that the preceding chapters have addressed to his well-known thesis, we still can raise some other aspects of the apparent contradiction of rational and self-interested people engaging themselves on behalf of others without taking any (material) advantage from it.

One point that arises from the various chapters in this book is that human action for collective purposes does not merely respond to an exigency of fulfilling one’s own self-interest. People do act to defend the interests, rights, and identities of others, even if they will not stand to benefit from their actions. As Tilly states, genuine cases of altruism do exist. On the one hand, this shows that, as Soule maintains, activism can be guided by moral, rather than selfish, concerns. She reminds us in this regard of Hannah Arendt’s (1961) idea that political action is motivated by principles and not only by individuals’ self-interest. On the other hand, however, Koopmans’ discussion of selective framing suggests that the interactive dynamics that produce political altruism do not necessarily refer to feelings of empathy or beliefs of generosity, but can involve interests as well. This shows all the complexity of the relationship between the concept of interest and that of altruism.

In a way, this raises the issue of whether what we define as political altruism after the fact is real altruism or some other kind of behavior disguised. Far from resolving this issue, I would like briefly to go back to it, as it is in a way at the core of the whole project of this volume. As said in the preface, the book’s main title deliberately ends with a question mark. This was intended to avoid determining ex ante something that must be assessed after careful examination of facts and explanations. In other words, in order to avoid determining at the outset whether the types of behaviors and collective actions described in the chapters to follow were instances of political altruism and thus to fall into the trap of tautology, we preferred to leave the question open. So, what can we say at this point?

To answer this question it is helpful to go back to the definition of the solidarity movement, which, after all, represents the main object of study of this book. Social movements have been defined as sustained challenges to power holders on behalf of an unprivileged population (Tarrow 1996; Tilly 1994), usually through noninstitutional means of action (della Porta and Diani 1999). Following this definition, social movements are a particular form of social relation, “historically specific clusters of political performances” (Tilly 1994) in which a group of challengers engage in public claim-making addressed to the authorities with the aim of influencing their decisions and behaviors. This characteristic sets social movements apart from other forms of contentious politics, such as revolutions, riots, insurrections, civil wars, and so forth, a broader category that can be defined as “collective activity on the part of claimants—or those who claim to represent them—relying at least in part on noninstitutionalized forms of interaction with elites, opponents, or the state”
(Tarrow 1996, 874). Most of the chapters in this volume deal with the solidarity movement as defined in these terms. This, at least, was our point of departure. Indeed, the brief overview of the movement’s mobilization which Passy provides in her introductory chapter sticks mostly with it. There is an important qualification to be made, though. As she argues, the solidarity movement is distinguished from other movements insofar as people involved in it defend the interests, rights, and identities of other individuals and groups. In brief, participants in this movement act altruistically, which means in Tilly’s terms that they produce benefits for other actors while enduring net losses themselves, regardless of possible benefits or losses for third parties.

However, as Koopmans and Statham (1999a) have aptly pointed out, the boundaries of a social movement can be expanded or retrenched depending on what we consider as being part of the movement. As they maintain, “far from a neat separation between ‘members’ and ‘challengers,’ democratic polities are characterized by cross-cutting alliances between polity members and challengers, and a mutual interpenetration of institutional and non-institutional politics” (208). These two authors’ respective contributions in this book clearly indicate that this rule applies to the solidarity movement as well. They show that political altruism is a field of contention that goes well beyond the area of social movements, strictly defined, and within which altruistic and solidary attitudes and behaviors arise from social relations. This is perhaps the most important lesson of this book: We do not behave altruistically because we are fundamentally “good,” nor because in our society we are taught to do something for others. Both are, in a way, true. Yet, if we are to understand why we act altruistically in certain situations and egoistically in others, we had better abandon both a totally voluntaristic and a completely deterministic view to embrace a perspective acknowledging that (what at least appears as) altruistic behavior is the product of situations and circumstances, that is, of social relations.

In addition, as Passy and Giugni maintain, just as the definition of the public good has changed in the course of history, the appraisal of altruistic acts depends on the philosophical view of the human being one endorses. It therefore seems more reasonable to avoid engaging in sterile discussions of the “true” nature of collective action in favor of others and move to the search for explanations of this type of behavior. As Tilly points out in his contribution, the task is, then, to identify the causal mechanisms involved in such relations rather than to wonder whether the observed behavior is genuinely altruistic or guided by other motives. Thus social relations rather than individual motivations should be the ground on which we judge the altruistic nature of the actions of the solidarity movement. We should avoid letting our explanations of political altruism rest on a normative point of view about the nature of the humans and allow for an assessment separate from individual aims and desires.
To conclude, let me reiterate that these very sketchy remarks are not intended as a summary of the content of the previous chapters, nor a synthesis of the main arguments and themes developed in this book. All I have tried to do is to underscore, without going into the details, a certain number of concepts which I think lie at the heart of any analysis of the solidarity movement and, more generally, of political altruism. Yet the five conceptual distinctions stressed in this conclusion permeate all the chapters that compose this volume, and therefore in a way they summarize, if not its substantial content, at least its conceptual skeleton. I think I can speak on behalf of all the authors who have contributed to the book if I maintain that charitable/political, national/transnational, structure/action, private/public, and self-interested/altruistic are all conceptual distinctions that should be kept in mind when studying this subject matter in all its multifaceted aspects.