

# When Costs are Benefits: Communicative Suffering as Political Protest\*

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In some social movements, we find people who invite suffering—or actually inflict it on themselves—as an act of protest. They march long distances, go willingly to jail, welcome or provoke the blows of police, refuse to eat, and even kill themselves. In short, they act *as if costs were benefits*. The costs are not merely time and money, but the more profound costs of physical hardship and emotional distress, and occasionally the ultimate cost of life itself. The benefits are collective rather than individual; these actions contribute to a “collective good”. This raises the problem of altruism in its most acute form: if it is hard to reconcile the act of voting with self-interest, consider the act of sacrificing one’s life. These actions raise another puzzle, less obvious but no less theoretically important. How can suffering contribute to a collective good? This question has rarely been posed, let alone answered. The neglect is curious given the significance of deliberately chosen suffering in the history of social movements. This chapter conceptualizes *communicative suffering* as one form or dimension of political protest, and identifies the mechanisms underpinning it. Examples are drawn from two movements: Indians challenging British rule in the 1920s and 1930s, and African Americans challenging racial oppression in the 1960s.

Communication is defined by Gambetta (2009a: xiv) as “any kind of act undertaken by an agent, the signaler, with the intention of conveying information to another agent,” the observer. Suffering can be defined as an action that is costly to the signaler in terms of harm or hardship but is not costly to another. Crucially, this cost is an inherent part of the message. The concept could be applied to a wide class of actions, such as someone overdosing on pills to persuade her partner that she is unhappy (Stengel 1969), or a prisoner cutting himself to convey fearlessness to his cellmates (Gambetta 2009a: ch. 5). My concern here is with actions that contribute to a collective good of bringing about political change. I distinguish two messages that suffering may convey: voluntary sacrifice and unequal harm. My aim is to specify the mechanisms through which unequal harm or voluntary sacrifice alters the beliefs and sentiments of various kinds of observers.

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The chapter proceeds as follows. It begins with a brief review of the literature on social movements, arguing that the literature has not appreciated the distinctiveness of communicative suffering. The second section provides empirical evidence that protesters do sometimes treat costs as benefits, and that authorities sometimes concur. The third section discusses voluntary sacrifice and unequal harm as contingent framings that depend partly on the observer's prior beliefs and sentiments. The effects of each, once perceived, are analyzed in the following sections, which considers three kinds of observer: constituents, who stand to benefit from the collective cause; publics, who are not directly involved; and authorities. The penultimate section discusses various complications and limitations. The conclusion highlights the value of theorizing with mechanisms.

### **1. Communicative suffering in social movements**

What I call communicative suffering has been discussed by several scholars. It appears in the first social scientific treatise on social movements, Case's *Non-Violent Coercion: A Study in Methods of Social Pressure* (1923). "Disobedience without violence" can win, declared Ross (1923: 2) in the Introduction, "by exciting the sympathy of disinterested onlookers". This initiated a tradition that both advocated and analyzed nonviolent protest (e.g. Gregg 1935; Bondurant 1958; Sharp 1960; Seifert 1965). A notable contributor was Shridharani (1939), who accompanied Gandhi on the salt march and then completed a Ph.D. in Social Science at Columbia University. This tradition was strangely ignored by sociologists who institutionalized the field of social movements in the 1970s. In this field, the most pertinent theoretical analysis is McAdam's (1996) discussion of "strategic dramaturgy" in the Civil Rights movement. The genius of Martin Luther King, Jr. lay in his "ability to lure segregationists into acts of extreme racist violence while maintaining his followers' commitment to nonviolence" (McAdam 1996: 354).

Previous literature narrowly focuses on avowedly nonviolent movements and on suffering inflicted by the authorities. The fact that protesters also harm themselves tends to be glossed over. Suicide protest is admittedly rare (Biggs 2005; 2013; Kim 2002; 2008). Hunger strikes, however, are a staple tactic of social movements. And hunger strikes in prison are used also by movements that pursue armed conflict. Over ten thousand Irish Republicans used this tactic from 1917 to 1981. Aside from the narrow focus, the literature also falls short of specifying the precise mechanisms that make communicative suffering potentially effective. Indeed, it is usually assimilated to the more straightforward logics of coercion or costless persuasion, thus effacing its distinctive character. According to Turner (1970: 148), civil disobedience is coercive because "Authorities are embarrassed by having to arrest otherwise law-abiding persons and by giving them the dangerous publicity of public trials."<sup>1</sup> Wherein

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<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Wilson (1961: 292) subsumes "unfavorable publicity" under the rubric of coercion.

lies the embarrassment? How does embarrassment coerce? According to Kim (2008: 570), suicide protest “symbolizes injustice and illegitimacy.” How does death symbolize?

I argue that communicative suffering is distinct from the logic of coercion. This logic was articulated by Clausewitz (1832: 104): “If our opponent is to be made to comply with our will, we must place him in a situation which is more oppressive to him than the sacrifice which we demand.” Thus protest can be a source of power because it imposes costs on the opponent, as the strike exemplifies. By going on strike, workers inflict costs on the employer, in the form of lost profits. The employer in turn inflicts costs on them, in the form of lost wages and often unemployment. “Other things being equal, each party naturally prefers to use its weapons in a way that hurts the other party maximally and itself as little as possible” (Elster 1989: 165). The employer might try to recruit scabs in order to maintain production and to threaten workers with unemployment; workers might try to strike at the peak of production, when the employer has most to lose from a stoppage. Although workers suffer costs, they do not seek them. If a wealthy socialist offered to replace their wages for the duration of the strike, they would accept with alacrity—thus attaining an unassailable bargaining position *vis à vis* their employer. This simple model helps us to understand the efficacy of protest in many situations. It also highlights what is so puzzling about protesters deliberately choosing to suffer costs—and, symmetrically, opponents deliberately refusing to inflict them.

Distinct from coercion is communication. Under the rubric of communication, we should delineate dramaturgy or symbolism from suffering: only the latter involves the signaller bearing a significant cost in harm or hardship. There is a big difference, to put it crudely, between burning a flag and setting oneself alight. (This is why I eschew McAdam’s dramaturgical terminology where suffering is involved.) Some protest actions are only symbolic, involving neither suffering nor coercion. When anti-globalization protesters invade the City of London and wash the windows of major banks, this cleverly symbolizes their demands for transparency in international finance. Many acts of protest augment symbolism with coercion. Advocates for animal rights throw red paint at people wearing fur, imposing severe costs on the consumers as well as symbolizing the bloody business of harvesting fur. Now consider another example: during the boycott of foreign textiles in Bombay in 1930, a woman picketing a store tried to remonstrate with a customer. When her arguments failed to persuade, she then stabbed her own arm, bleeding on his new purchase. This act damaged the cloth, it dramatically symbolized how foreign cloth consumed the life-blood of the Indian nation, and it sprang from her own suffering. Using red paint would have conveyed the same symbolic message. Opening her own veins with the knife added the element dubbed here communicative suffering. In this instance, it was successful. “Almost in tears the buyer surrendered the cloth” (Slocombe 1936: 393).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Slocombe, an English journalist in Bombay, heard this account from the cloth merchant.

## 2. Evidence that costs are beneficial to the collective good

Having drawn these theoretical distinctions, we can begin with empirical evidence that costs are beneficial to the collective good, according to either protesters or authorities. Following imprisonment or violence, protesters may welcome what has happened. After a demonstration in Lucknow in 1928 had been brutally dispersed by police, Jawaharlal Nehru commented:

I have not the slightest grievance against the government and officials ... they had completely played into the hands of the boycotters. They had brought the issues before the people ... that the British rule in India means the policeman's baton. (Low 1997: 88)

After a similar incident in Lahore in the same year, Lala Lajpat Rai declared: "every blow that was hurled at us this afternoon, was a nail in the coffin of the British Empire" (Joshi 1966: Ixiii). Rai died nineteen days later, and this was attributed to his treatment by the police. During the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's (SCLC) campaign in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, the police unleashed dogs on black bystanders (Eskew 1997: 226-7). The SCLC's Executive Director, Wyatt T. Walker, was jubilant. "We've got a movement. We've got a movement. We had some police brutality. They brought out the dogs. We've got a movement!" (Forman 1972: 312).<sup>3</sup>

Such statements after the fact could be dismissed as bravado, an attempt to maintain morale following unexpected repression. Such an interpretation does not, however, account for cases where protesters deliberately provoke violence or seek imprisonment. In the campaign against the salt tax in 1930, Gandhi decided to occupy the salt works at Dharasana. He notified the Viceroy, Lord Irwin, offering him the choice of yielding to their demands or of arresting or brutalizing the protesters. The confrontation was witnessed by Webb Miller, a journalist with the *Chicago Tribune* (see also Weber 1997: 433-55). "You will be beaten but you must not resist", the protesters were told (Miller 1936: 192). Then they marched towards the salt works:

... scores of native police rushed upon the advancing marchers and rained blows on their heads with steel-shod *lathis* [bamboo sticks]. Not one of the marchers even raised an arm to fend off the blows. ... The survivors without breaking ranks silently and doggedly marched on until struck down. (Miller 1936: 193)

There was nothing unexpected about this violence. As for imprisonment, in the same year a local Congress leader in Hyderabad wrote to Jawaharlal Nehru:

On the whole Government is avoiding arrests. We are going to force the issue now & compel arrests. Without arrest or something sensational the public enthusiasm may wane. (Brown 1977: 117 n. 41)

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<sup>3</sup> Forman is admittedly an unsympathetic witness; he was disgusted that they were "happy about police brutality."

Deliberate imprisonment became a staple tactic of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE). When sentenced to pay a fine or go to jail, protesters would choose jail (e.g. Stephens 1960). Even if they intended to appeal their conviction, they would first spend time in jail before being bailed out to appeal; this became known as “jail-no-bail”. In 1965 SCLC chose to campaign in Selma, Alabama in part because of the vicious reputation of the County Sheriff, James Clark. When he blocked a procession on the steps of the courthouse, C. T. Vivian harangued the sheriff and eventually dared the man to hit him. A punch sent him reeling down the steps, which was captured on television (Garrow 1986: 391). “Every time it appears that the movement is dying out,” noted a staff member of SCLC, “Sheriff Clark comes to our rescue” (Garrow 1986: 391).

The notion that repression can help rather than harm the protesters’ cause is sometimes also appreciated by the authorities. This realization may come after the fact. After the police violently dispersed a demonstration in Lucknow in 1930, the provincial governor confided to the Viceroy that it was “a mistake”: “It may be very satisfactory at times to apply forcible methods to an obstinate lot of ‘satyagrahis,’ but the ultimate gain does not always compensate one for the trouble ... on the whole it has formed somewhat of an asset to Congress” (Low 1997: 112). More importantly, authorities sometimes anticipate the negative effects of repression, and so choose not to exercise it. When Gandhi began the salt campaign, the authorities were reluctant to imprison him (though they eventually did so). The Governor of the Punjab, Sir Geoffrey de Montgomery, suspected that Gandhi was “dreadfully anxious to get arrested” (Dalton 1993: 127-8). The Viceroy acknowledged “that our action in not arresting Gandhi is very illogical”, for he had violated the law, and other leaders had been imprisoned. Yet “up to now it has helped us and embarrassed the other side” (Dalton 1993: 130). In Albany, Georgia, the Police Chief, Laurie Pritchett, proclaimed an innovative method to combat SCLC’s campaign: “We’re going to out-nonviolent them” (Hampton and Fayer 1990: 106). Indeed, the U.S. Attorney General, Robert Kennedy, congratulated Pritchett on the peaceful arrests. King summed up the lesson:

racial violence against peaceful demonstrators was an essential prerequisite to securing racial justice. ... We learned this in Albany, Georgia, where we marched but were never met with violence. Our demonstrators were arrested and placed in jail in a rather orderly fashion, but because there was no true confrontation the movement gradually died and none of our demands were met. (Garrow 1986: 692)

If authorities refuse to exact costs on protesters, then protesters can inflict suffering on themselves. This kind of voluntary action demonstrates clearly that protesters view their own suffering as beneficial for their cause. In the most extreme case, there is suicide protest, where an individual kills himself or herself as an act of protest. The typical method is burning oneself to death, which maximizes pain (Biggs 2005: 192-3). More common is the hunger

strike, where the individual's physical suffering—sometimes with the threat of death—is used to compel concessions. Gandhi first used fasting as a political weapon in 1918, during a lockout of textile workers in Ahmedabad. After weeks without pay, many of them were drifting back to work on the employers' terms. This broke the pledge they had made, at Gandhi's insistence, to die rather than succumb. Faced with this desperate situation, Gandhi announced that "I shall not take food, nor use a car till you get 35 per cent increase or all of you die fighting for it" (Erikson 1969: 351). He forbade others to join him. The fast was avowedly intended to stiffen the workers' resolve, but it also placed pressure on the employers. After only two days, a compromise was agreed. In subsequent years, Gandhi's propensity for fasting contributed to the reluctance of British authorities to arrest him. Lord Irwin worried about "the probability, or at least possibility, of his going on hunger-strike if we put him in prison. This last is embarrassing" (Dalton 1993: 126).

On a much smaller scale, a lengthy march on foot also entails self-inflicted costs. Gandhi prepared his campaign against the salt tax in 1930 with a march in Gujarat. The march was highly symbolic: it was to terminate at the coast where he would break the law by collecting salt from the sea, on a date commemorating a previous campaign in 1919. The march's impact also came from the willingness of the marchers to endure physical hardship. A duration of five days was rejected in favour of twenty-four days. Gandhi along with eighty followers walked over two hundred miles on foot. On the march he castigated the followers for trying to ease the hardship, by for example trucking in fresh milk. "Extravagance has no room in this campaign" (Dalton 1993: 110). By the time he reached the coast, over ten thousand people had travelled to welcome him. In 1965, black Americans staged a march from Selma to Montgomery, the capital of Alabama. Again, it was decided to walk rather than ride (Garrow 1986: 394). Although it only took five days, the marchers ran the risk of violent attack; they had to be protected by units of the National Guard under Federal command. The importance of physical endurance—beyond the symbolic journey from one point to another—is underlined by the disparaging remarks of a hostile white onlooker: "they had walked for the TV cameras ... and they got on the trucks, they got in the ambulance, and they rode ... they didn't march all the way" (Raines 1977: 219).

In all these varied instances, whether self-inflicted or imposed by the authorities, the normal calculus of repression is inverted: protesters act as if their own suffering will serve to advance their cause. The authorities sometimes concur. To explain this paradoxical inversion, we need to dissect suffering into two components.

### **3. Unequal harm and voluntary sacrifice**

At the core of communicative suffering is the fact that protesters experience harm, including deprivation as well as physical injury or death. This harm is meaningful because it is placed in more encompassing contexts or frames (Goffman 1974). When perpetrator A hurts victim B,

without B hurting (or threatening to hurt) A, then B has suffered *unequal harm*. In the situations considered here, A has power over B; for example, A is a police officer, while B is an ordinary member of the public. When individual B deliberately chooses an action which will result in harm to herself or himself while also benefiting collective cause C, then B has made a *voluntary sacrifice*. In grammatical terms, the protester is patient in the first frame, and agent in the second. In some cases, unequal harm and voluntary sacrifice combine, as at Dharasana. In other cases, there is only voluntary sacrifice, as in the salt march. In still other cases, there is only unequal harm. An example is the Amritsar massacre in 1919, when General Dyer ordered troops to open fire—without any prior warning—on a large protest rally, killing at least four hundred (the official death toll). Such cases are not included in my conception of communicative suffering, which requires protesters to intentionally seek suffering. But they do illuminate the significance of unequal harm, and thus provide clues for why it may be sought.

Unequal harm and voluntary sacrifice are not empirical facts, but contingent frames. Where one observer sees an unprovoked attack on peaceful protesters, another will see police defending themselves from a violent mob. This is compounded by the fact that in the situations considered here, the “observers” are generally not eyewitnesses. Instead, they hear what happened narrated by participants, or read about it in a newspaper, or see photographs or video.

What mechanisms explain an observer’s apprehension of unequal harm or voluntary sacrifice? They depend partly on the observer’s prior beliefs and sentiments. To simplify, consider two components. The first is the degree to which the observer identifies with B rather than A. The second is the observer’s belief in the legitimacy of the regime that gives A power over B, and belief in the legitimacy of cause C. The attribution of legitimacy usually goes along with identification, but not always. Many Northern whites who held the Southern system of racial oppression to be unjustified nonetheless naturally identified with Southern whites rather than with blacks. The apprehension of unequal harm to B is more likely when the observer identifies with B rather than A, or believes that the regime is illegitimate. The apprehension of voluntary sacrifice is more likely when the observer identifies with B, or believes that the cause C is legitimate. As an example of how preconceptions can block out apparently incontrovertible evidence, consider this white woman in Selma writing to the President in 1965. “Just as the Reds bombed their own air strips during the Korean war and blamed U.S. planes ... so have Negro leaders in the South bombed their own homes and churches and placed the blame on the White southerner” (Lee 2002: 162). Likewise a hunger striker can be accused of eating surreptitiously. Even when someone indisputably dies for a cause, as with self-immolation, this can be discounted by the refusal to grant agency: the protester was mentally deranged, or was duped by a movement organization.

Although preconceptions are important, so is what (apparently) happened. Protest can be orchestrated accordingly. Unequal harm depends crucially on the asymmetry between A and B, contrasting with a conflict between two antagonists fighting on equal terms. Protesters emphasize asymmetry by refusing to fight back when attacked by the police. Asymmetry can be amplified by the deployment of women or children. During the civil disobedience campaign in India, women would surround the men with their bodies, forming an embarrassing obstacle for the police (e.g. Farson 1937: 141). At a march in Bombay, a woman held up her baby to a British policeman, screaming “Strike him!” (Farson 1937: 142). In Birmingham, SCLC recruited large numbers of school children to take to the streets and fill the jails. This is partly explained by the fact that imprisonment was less costly for them than for adults, who faced the loss of employment (James Bevel in Hampton and Fayer 1990: 131). Nevertheless, images of high-pressure hoses being turned on school children maximized the asymmetry.

The apprehension of unequal harm or voluntary sacrifice (or both) is contingent. If it does occur, the consequences vary according to the observer’s social location, defined again by their prior beliefs and sentiments. Three positions will be discussed here: constituents, publics, and authorities. *Constituents* of the movement identify more with protesters than with authorities and do not hold the regime to be legitimate. They are “people for whom the movement presumes to speak” (Turner 1970: 50). They are potential participants, and the movement’s aim is to turn latent sympathy into active contribution. *Publics* are people who do not identify with the protesters or who have unformed beliefs about the regime’s legitimacy. They are socially or geographically removed from the conflict. Examples include the American public in the case of Indian independence, and Northern whites for the Civil Rights movement. The movement’s aim is to attract their attention and to develop their sympathy, which through a circuitous route may put pressure on the regime (Lipsky 1968). *Authorities* believe that the regime is legitimate, naturally. Undermining their belief is the movement’s most ambitious aim and the most difficult to attain. The effect of communicative suffering on each type of observer will be discussed in turn. Seven mechanisms are enumerated.

#### **4. Effects on constituents**

(1) *Perceiving unequal harm, constituents feel empathy for the victims and anger towards the perpetrators.* After a protest in 1930, Mushir Husain Kidwai (a member of the Indian Legislative Assembly) wrote:

When the people saw with their own eyes their helpless kith and kin mercilessly belaboured by lathis and heavy bludgeons even though they were meekly lying down on the road receiving blows without the least



retaliation ... no wonder that every shade of opinion in Lucknow, including the Muslims and the moderates was roused to indignation. (Low 1997: 111)

These emotions altered the observer's beliefs.<sup>4</sup> The legitimacy of imperial rule was tarnished even for those who had believed in reform within the regime's institutional framework. Conceivably empathy with the protesters also strengthened the identification with them, thus helping to congeal an 'Indian' identity—defined in opposition to the British rulers, attenuating differences of caste, class, religion, language, and so forth. According to Kidwai, Muslims who had remained aloof from the Congress Party's campaign increased their identification with the predominantly Hindu protesters. Identifications, though, are surely more resistant to alteration than are beliefs.

An important distinction should be drawn here. Unequal harm inflicted on protesters should not be conflated with material grievances that make the regime more onerous. According to Goldstone and Tilly (2001:181), for example, "repression that is excessive can create a perception of increased current threat under the status quo, due to greater illegitimacy and violence from the regime" (see also Oberschall 1994: 80). Just because demonstrators in Lucknow had been attacked by the police, that did not in fact threaten the majority of residents who did not demonstrate. Contrast, for instance, the Bombay Presidency's decision to raise land taxes by 30% in 1925, which provoked a protracted protest campaign in Bardoli. The tax increase worsened the plight of all farmers in that jurisdiction; it made the status quo worse. Repression that is targeted at protesters—at it usually is—does not represent a material threat to non-protesters.<sup>5</sup> Unequal harm works through emotions and legitimacy, not through changes to material payoffs.

This mechanism may lead to a decision to protest. Needless to say, the decision depends on many other factors, such as the prospect for success and the expected cost of participation. This caveat is crucial because the apprehension of undeserved harm is almost inevitably coupled with a higher anticipated cost of protest; to translate this into emotional terms, increased fear. Whether the net effect will be positive or negative—whether it makes protest more or less likely—depends on a host of other circumstances. There is no reason, however, to expect fear to predominate. A study of 31 massacres in the twentieth century (Francisco 2004) finds that the number protesting in the days afterwards was far higher than the number in the initial demonstration, though the type of protest usually changed to a form less vulnerable to repression. Thus the Amritsar massacre was followed by *hartal* (closure of shops) and a railway strike. When victims are killed, funerals become ideal gatherings to share and reinforce anger against the regime.

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<sup>4</sup> There is considerable evidence that moral judgments are primarily emotional, with reasons being used to justify intuitions (e.g. Haidt 2012).

<sup>5</sup> The importance of distinguishing indiscriminate from selective repression is emphasized in a different context by Kalyvas (2007).

(2) *Perceiving voluntary sacrifice, constituents feel gratitude and hence obligation to participate.* Reciprocity is a basic moral principle. This is brought into play when protesters sacrifice for a collective cause that will benefit the observer. Gratitude leads to emotional investment in those who have suffered for the cause, especially for those who have paid the ultimate price. This gratitude depends on the victim deliberately choosing to suffer; unequal harm alone is insufficient. Gratitude in turn puts the observer under some obligation to reciprocate, to also make a contribution to the cause. This mechanism is identified by Kim's (2002) analysis of testimonials left at the grave of Park Sung Hee, who set herself on fire in Seoul in 1991. One visitor declared "I resolve that I will become a fighter who will not be ashamed to stand before you" (Kim 2002: 163). Here the sense of obligation was expressed negatively as shame for not contributing as much as the exemplary martyr. As above, the sense of obligation is only one factor entering into the decision to participate in protest.

(3) *Perceiving voluntary sacrifice, constituents realize that protesters are genuinely committed to the cause.* Signaling commitment is especially important for leaders. Scholars who study social movements assume that leaders are truly altruistic, devoted to the collective cause. In fact leaders often exploit the movement for their own private gain, either power or resources. Constituents are naturally sceptical, and need to be convinced that those claiming leadership are altruistic rather than opportunistic. While the motivation of a leader is unobservable, the leader's voluntary sacrifice provides a credible signal of commitment. This is a straightforward application of signalling theory (Veblen 1899; Gambetta 2009b). An opportunist who cares only about private rewards would participate only if the expected rewards exceeded the cost of participation. Therefore someone who participates when the personal cost exceeds any private rewards is clearly not an opportunist. In many cases this signal of commitment goes automatically with the assumption of a leadership position, because of the predictable repression that ensues. The Civil Rights movement in Mississippi before the mid 1960s is an extreme example. "If they were willing to be jailed, beaten and shot at, willing to leave school, willing to live on virtually no money, then it was likely that they were serious about the beliefs they espoused" (Payne 1995: 353). In some cases, though, we find leaders deliberately choosing sacrifice in order to establish their credibility.

Gandhi's fast in 1918 was provoked by criticism from impoverished workers. He had insisted that they not interfere with the employment of others in their stead. One of his staff reported a bitter comment on Gandhi and another leader: "They come and go in their car, they eat elegant food, while we suffer death agonies" (Erikson 1969: 351; also Brown 1972: 118). On the very next day, Gandhi foreswore food and automotive transport, which suggests how deeply he felt the need to prove his own sincerity, as well as to stiffen the resolve of the workers. King was first arrested in Albany during a demonstration in 1961. Joining hundreds of other protesters, he went to jail rather than being bailed out. "I will not accept bond", he told a reporter. "If convicted I will refuse to pay the fine. I expect to spend Christmas in jail. I

hope thousands will join me” (Garrow 1986: 185). Two days later, however, he posted bond and left jail. Local leaders had informed him that concessions had been offered by city officials, but this was promptly denied by the mayor. Louis Lomax, a black reporter from Georgia, imagined how people would react:

Lord, child, we got to watch our nigger leaders. They’ll lead you into trouble with the white folks and then run off and leave you like he did them people in Albany. (Lomax 1962: 110-11)

After King was convicted some months later, he elected to serve 45 days in jail rather than pay the \$178 fine. Ironically, the mayor arranged for King’s fine to be paid secretly, along with the fine of his fellow activist, Ralph Abernathy. “I do not appreciate the subtle and conniving tactics used to get us out of jail”, King fulminated to reporters on his release (Garrow 1986: 203). He had insisted to Pritchett that “we want to serve this time.” “God knows”, replied the police chief, “I don’t want you in my jail” (Hampton 1986).

## **5. Effects on publics**

Because publics (in the terminology used here) are disinterested, the preliminary requirement is to gain their attention (Collins 2001). Unequal harm and voluntarily sacrifice have high news value. Gandhi arranged for three cinema companies to film his salt march on newsreel, and it received front-page coverage in American newspapers (Dalton 1993: 107). At the Dharasana raid, Miller was the sole foreign journalist present. Although the British authorities surreptitiously blocked his telegraphed report, they could not prevent it from eventually being published (Miller 1936: 197-8; also Farson 1937: 144-5). It was published in more than 1300 newspapers all over the world. Miller’s account caused a sensation in the United States, being read into the Senate’s official record and circulated widely as a pamphlet (Miller 1936: 198-9). The Civil Rights movement exploited television as well as print. “There never was any more skillful manipulation of the news media than there was at Birmingham”, boasted Walker (Garrow 1986: 264).

(4) *Perceiving unequal harm, the public comes to view the regime as illegitimate.* This mechanism seems similar to mechanism (1), but here the disclosure of information is crucial. The extent of racial oppression was already known to blacks in the American South. It was not to Northern whites. How does suffering disclose information? A movement obviously provides rhetorical arguments for the regime’s illegitimacy. But rhetorical arguments also exist on the other side. (This we tend to forget after a movement has been successful; in retrospect, its arguments seem self-evidently valid.) In denouncing the Supreme Court’s decision to end school segregation, Senator James Eastland from Mississippi invoked Gandhi’s struggle against the British Empire; white Southerners were similarly oppressed by a foreign (Federal) imperialism (Townes 2002: 243). To put it crudely, talk is cheap. Consider one aspect of racial segregation in the South before 1960: blacks were barred from eating a

meal at stores where they shopped. Arguments against racial discrimination were countered by arguments for the right of merchants to choose their customers, and the right of whites not to be forced to eat with blacks. A disinterested observer trying to evaluate these conflicting claims needs to weigh up the level of deprivation that segregation imposed on blacks—versus the level of deprivation that desegregation would impose on whites. Verbal declarations by either side were not informative.

When blacks proved that they were willing to pay a high cost—time spent in sit-ins and picketing, which then led to assault and arrest—to end this segregation, that provided credible evidence of their deprivation under the regime. Such costs were incurred automatically, as the inevitable consequence of protest. In addition, costs could be deliberately sought, as when protesters chose to remain in jail rather than pay the fine. This maximized asymmetry: two months incarceration as a penalty for attempting to buy lunch. Such unequal harm undermined the regime’s legitimacy in the eyes of observers. “While confined here in the Birmingham City Jail ...” begins King’s most famous text (Bass 2001: 238). Imagine altering that sentence to “While staying here in Gaston’s Motel ...” (SCLC’s temporary headquarters in the city). This would not diminish the letter’s rhetorical brilliance, but one doubts whether it would be so famous. Suffering gave the argument credibility. After violence at Selma, President Lyndon Johnson’s television address to promote a new Voting Bill made the connection between unequal harm and the illegitimacy of racial oppression. “The blows that were received, the blood that was shed, the life of the good man that was lost, must strengthen the determination of each of us to bring full and equal and exact justice to all of our people” (Garrow 1986: 407).

This mechanism may depend on the observer identifying enough with the regime for the judgment of illegitimacy to be bound up with a sense of shame. If identification with the regime is too strong, as already suggested above, then the unequal harm will not be perceived (or will even be reversed, with protesters viewed as inflicting harm on their oppressors). If the observer identifies with neither side, then harm loses its emotional immediacy. To use a more recent example, repression in Apartheid South Africa provoked a strong response in English-speaking countries in the 1980s and mobilized an important social movement, and yet instances of more brutal repression in other African countries were hardly noticed.

(5) *Perceiving voluntary sacrifice, the public comes to view the protesters as courageous and hence worthy.* This mechanism is pertinent where the regime is justified by the alleged immaturity and inferiority of the oppressed; African Americans and Indians did not deserve the rights of citizenship. King in 1960 called for

a group of volunteers who will willingly go to jail rather than pay bail or fines. This courageous willingness to go to jail may well be the thing to waken the dozing conscience of many of our white brothers.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Press release at <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/mlk-student-sit-ins#>.

Seeking jail accentuated asymmetry, which is mechanism (4). In addition, it implies that voluntary sacrifice as a signal of worthiness. The language was echoed in Johnson's television address: the black man's (and woman's, we must add) "actions and protests, his courage to risk safety and even to risk his life, have awakened the conscience of this nation" (Garrow 1986: 408).

## 6. Effects on authorities

(6) *Perceiving unequal harm, authorities become ashamed of their actions.* Proponents of nonviolent protest sometimes argue that it may demoralize the regime itself. Vithalbai Patel explained the logic in 1921: "I am going to make you beat me so outrageously that after a while you will begin to feel ashamed of yourself. Even your own family will be horrified at you" (Parekh 1989: 151). There are echoes of this in the reaction to the Amritsar massacre. Lord Curzon, former Viceroy of India, asked rhetorically "is there anyone in your Lordships' House who can read that tale without sentiments of horror, and even of shame?" (Fein 1977: 138). (Most Lords were not ashamed; a majority voted in favour of Dyer.) This mechanism is most pertinent for agents of the regime who have to actually enact violence. The recollection of a senior English police officer in Bombay, John Court Curry, is intriguing. He believed in the legitimacy of British rule, insisting that "law-breakers could not be allowed to continue their deliberate misbehaviour." Nevertheless, "on every occasion when the Congress staged a large demonstration I felt a severe physical nausea." Having "had no such feelings on occasions of serious rioting", he could only explain the malady as "due to the extreme distaste at the idea of using force against these 'non-violent' people" (Dalton 1993: 133). Note the inverted commas, emphasizing his resentment at the manipulative character of the protest. This emotional toll led him to resign in 1930. In several instances, native Indian police refused to inflict violence against unresisting protesters (e.g. Shridharani 1939: 53).<sup>7</sup> In Birmingham, firemen once refused to hose water on praying demonstrators (Forman 1972: 312).

(7) *Perceiving voluntary sacrifice, authorities come to realize that protesters cannot be deterred.* This mechanism is included for completeness though it does not seem practically important. In Birmingham, as the police herded arrested students on to school buses transporting them to jail, one officer remarked to another: "ten or fifteen years from now, we will look back on this and we will say, 'How stupid can you be?'" (quoted by Glenn Evans in Raines 1977: 174). The meaning of his statement is ambiguous. Perhaps he was ashamed of arresting schoolchildren, which would indicate mechanism (6). Conceivably their commitment led him to realize that maintaining white supremacy—even though his belief in

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<sup>7</sup> But the opposite effect was not unknown. At Dharasana, Miller (1936: 195) described the native police as "enraged by the nonresistance", and they inflicted horrific injuries even after they had incapacitated the protesters.

its legitimacy was unshaken—would be impossible. The logic would be something like this: if even children go willingly to jail, then the regime can no longer deter the black population from protesting on such a scale that repression will no longer be possible.

These effects on authorities are minor compared to the effects on publics and constituents. Although Gandhi and King emphasized the ability of suffering to convert their opponents, scholars are consistently sceptical (e.g. Ross 1923: 2). British rule in India and white supremacy in the American South were not undermined by the refusal of the regime's agents to implement repression. In other contexts, though, widespread refusal may have hastened the regime's end. Two examples are Russia in 1917 and East Germany in 1989. In these cases the regime was already tottering, which reduced the risk of refusing to obey orders (and increased the risk of carrying them out). In addition, the would-be perpetrators identified relatively closely with the protesters.

## **7. Complications and limitations**

Unequal harm and voluntary sacrifice can alter the beliefs and sentiments of various audiences through several mechanisms. These mechanisms (or a subset of them) are necessary for communicative suffering. In addition, protesters need to understand these mechanisms and deliberately choose to act accordingly. Evidence of this awareness has been provided in the chapter's second section. There are two interesting complications. Protesters often conceal their instrumental usage of these mechanisms, to avoid the accusation of manipulation. Thus hunger strikers who demand special treatment as “political prisoners”—distinct from criminals—will represent this demand as a matter of principle rather than as an opportunity for unequal harm and voluntary sacrifice. Gandhi (1910: 147) even claimed hyperbolically that a pure practitioner of *satyagraha* “cannot allow himself to be regarded as a martyr nor can he complain of the hardships ... nor may he make political capital out of what may appear to be injustice or ill-treatment”. (He acknowledged that this pure form “can exist only in theory”.) Concealment is especially likely where harm is inflicted by the authorities. Garrow (1978: 220-31) argues that King and SCLC were never able to fully acknowledge their intentional provocation of violence. As evidence that manipulation may diminish the effect of communicative suffering, Farson (1937: 138) complained that his dispatches were reprinted “completely omitting all paragraphs where I showed that the ghastly affair was inevitable, deliberately invited by the Indians themselves”.

The second complication is that the motivation for communicative suffering may partly derive from belief in a nonexistent mechanism. Exchange is an elemental mechanism of social interaction: in order to get someone to give you something, you must give something in return. Humans tend to project this social mechanism onto the cosmic order, which justifies multifarious kinds of sacrificial action. “History has proven over and over again that unearned suffering is redemptive”, according to King (Miller 1992: 152). “No country has ever risen

without being purified through the fires of suffering”, insisted Gandhi (Sridharani 1939: 285). As social scientists, we do not accept the existence of any such mechanism; our world is disenchanted. Nevertheless, people who intuit such a cosmic exchange mechanism have further reason to enact unequal harm and voluntary sacrifice.

Communicative suffering not only requires protesters to appreciate (even if dimly or for the wrong reason) the benefit of unequal harm and voluntary sacrifice. It also requires extraordinary self-discipline. Submitting to violence without fleeing or fighting back is not natural. At Dharasana, after watching so many succumb to the blows of *lathis*, the crowd “was on the verge of launching a mass attack upon the police.” The leaders “rushed up and down, pleading with and exhorting the intensely excited men to remember Gandhi’s instructions” (Miller 1936: 194; 202 for another example). They succeeded. In a similar incident in Birmingham, some of the crowd began to throw bricks at the police. James Bevel of the SCLC used a police bullhorn to shout orders: “If you’re not going to respect policemen, you’re not going to be in the movement” (Hampton and Fayer 1990: 134; for another example, Payne 1995: 290). The extreme of self-discipline is death by hunger. Jatin Das was a supporter of Congress who became involved with a group waging armed resistance to British rule. After he was captured and imprisoned in 1929, he went on hunger strike, demanding special status for all political prisoners. Although the government made concessions and offered to release him on bail, he persisted. He died after 63 days (Venu 1930).<sup>8</sup>

This chapter has been devoted to providing evidence for communicative suffering and elucidating the mechanisms that underpin it. Now it must be placed in broader context. Communicative suffering is only one form or aspect of protest. I have abstracted it for analytical purposes, but many protest actions combine communicative suffering with coercion. For example, jail-no-bail was sometimes advocated on the grounds that it would inflict costs: “fill the jails until Southern cities were impoverished” (Rustin 1963: 107; see also Farmer in Haines 1977: 109-10). Certainly communicative suffering alone did not win Indians their independence or African Americans their freedom. Coercion played a crucial role in both movements. Significant costs were inflicted on white business owners, for example, through boycotts by black consumers and sit-ins which kept away white consumers.

Communicative suffering can be entangled with coercion in actions in which the protester offers the adversary a choice between inflicting suffering or accepting the cost of disruption.<sup>9</sup> To enforce the boycott against foreign cloth, Indian picketers would lie down to prevent deliveries. This kind of threat—Doherty (1999) calls it “manufactured vulnerability”—is widely used in contemporary protest: Greenpeace sails a ship into an area where nuclear

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<sup>8</sup> Das had manufactured bombs but had not been responsible for killing anyone. Therefore he did not face the prospect of execution, unlike some of his fellow prisoners (such as Bhagat Singh).

<sup>9</sup> More rarely it is deployed against constituents. In 1922, students boycotting Calcutta University sat prone in front of its gates: “they implored the conforming students not to hesitate to step on their bodies if the latter felt justified in entering that way” (Shridharani 1939: 21).

testing is planned; environmental activists lock themselves atop fragile tripods, blocking construction; international peace activists use their bodies to thwart Israeli military operations against Palestinians. Although protesters may be confident that the potential suffering will act as a deterrent, there is still always a risk—the opponent may prove unexpectedly intransigent or something can go awry. In Bombay in 1930, an English lorry driver ran over and killed a young man blocking the driveway of a store; in the furor that followed, even the storekeeper himself joined the movement (Shridharani 1939: 21).

Focusing on the efficacy of communicative suffering, this chapter has ignored how it varies across social contexts. Here I can do no more than survey a frontier for future research. Culture surely makes a difference. Some traditions valorize suffering more than others, and this would make it less onerous for protesters to undertake acts of communicative suffering—as distinct, for example, from costly acts of violence. Gandhi’s methods echoed Hindu traditions. In north India, a traditional method of redress was sitting *dharna*: stationing oneself prominently outside the opponent’s residence, and not leaving or eating until satisfaction was obtained (Spodek 1971: 363-4). Religious asceticism, in particular, provides not just a conducive belief system but also practices of self-discipline. Monks are heavily represented among suicide protesters. Still, communicative suffering may flourish even where it apparently lacks cultural resonance. Abdul Ghaffar Khan mobilized Pashtuns on the Northwest Frontier to deploy the methods of *satyagraha*, even though they were Muslims with a tradition of violent feuding (Banerjee 2000). The culture of audiences is also significant, insofar as it fosters empathy for suffering. Tocqueville (1840: part III, ch. 1) identified “gentleness of mores” as a peculiar feature of modern societies. The decline of cruel public punishment by the state serves as an index for such a trend. Aversion to violence makes it possible for communicative suffering to appeal to distant publics (Biggs 2013: 412).

The efficacy of communicative suffering depends also on the character of the political system. British India and the American South were similar insofar as the rulers were ultimately accountable to a democratic public, informed by a free media. Edward Thompson (1939: 289) observed that Gandhi’s method

succeeded in India, because it was used against a Government that—however imperfectly—recognized that the game of insurrection and repression had rules; his enemy had streaks of humanity and liberalism. The government therefore found itself ultimately helpless, when line after line of Nationalists stood up fearlessly, to be struck down by the *lathis* of the police, while British spectators were overcome with shame and American journalists hurried off to cable home their indignation.

Low (1997: 39) sharpens the point by comparing what would have happened to Gandhi under other imperial regimes. “In Indonesia it is well-nigh certain that he would have been exiled



[by the Dutch] to some distant island for life: while in Vietnam ... there is every likelihood that he would have been done to death [by the French]”.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, I have argued that communicative suffering is a distinct form or dimension of political protest. People sometimes protest by seeking or threatening their own suffering, which does not impose any material costs on their opponent and is not merely symbolic. In the broadest perspective, acts of communicative suffering are not common. But they occur in sufficient numbers—and in sufficiently diverse cultural contexts—to pose an important theoretical puzzle. As with any form of protest, one can always ask why some individuals are willing to suffer costs for a collective good; I have not addressed this question. I have focused instead on the question of why suffering can be instrumentally effective: why costs sometimes benefit the collective good. I argue that some people understand, however imperfectly or tacitly, that their suffering—voluntary sacrifice or unequal harm or both—can be instrumentally effective. To explain this efficacy, I have proposed seven mechanisms. Four of these seem to be most important in practice. For people who identify with the protesters or do not grant the regime legitimacy, (1) unequal harm evokes empathy with the victim and anger against the regime; voluntary sacrifice (2) enables them to signal that they are genuinely committed to the cause and (3) creates an obligation to contribute also. For disinterested publics, (4) unequal harm reveals the injustice of the regime, seizing attention and—for those who identify with the perpetrators—eliciting shame.

I hope that this chapter has illustrated the advantages of a mechanistic approach. The phenomenon investigated here—the fact that costs can benefit a social movement—has been appreciated in sociology since Case’s *Non-Violent Coercion* (1923). However the literature does not attempt to specify the various mechanism through which suffering can be a source of power, and tends to subsume communicative suffering under coercion or symbolism. This chapter followed the analytic approach of dissecting and abstracting (Hedström 2005). Unequal harm and voluntary sacrifice are abstractions, abstracted from the complexity of social interaction in particular historical episodes. They refer not to social reality but rather to ways of framing that reality. These framings are contingent, depending on the observer’s prior intentional state as well as what actually happened. Their effects—or to put it more precisely, how an observer’s perception of unequal harm or voluntary sacrifice can affect the observer’s beliefs and sentiments—have been dissected into seven distinct mechanisms. These mechanisms in turn make certain actions more likely, but there is no automatic link between event and action. When people perceive that the police savagely beat their fellows, this leads them to feel empathy with the victim and anger against the perpetrator, which in turn makes them more likely to protest. Whether they will actually participate in protest, however,

depends also on other factors. There is nothing crudely mechanical, in other words, about explanation by mechanisms.

The mechanistic approach pivots around individual action. This chapter has sought the micro foundations of communicative suffering, focusing on the consequences of action for someone else's beliefs and sentiments. The approach shares with rational choice theory the presumption that action is purposive. Because protesters sometimes acted as if costs as benefits, that fact demands explanation as rational, instrumental behaviour. What is rejected is the assumption (typically bundled with rational choice) that individuals are entirely or mainly self-interested. Instead, the mechanisms adumbrated here involve empathy for others and concern for legitimacy. Empathy and legitimacy should not be discounted by social scientists working in the tradition of methodological individualism; consider their prominence in the foundational work of Adam Smith and Max Weber.

The abstract character of mechanisms encourages the search for commonalities among apparently diverse phenomena. This chapter has focused on two movements from different cultures facing different political circumstances. The same mechanisms can be identified at further removes. Suicide attacks, for example, are in some cases be intended to evoke voluntary sacrifice (Gambetta 2005). Religious martyrdom can be used for the same purpose (Stark 1997: ch. 8). These parallels demand further exploration, transcending the traditional academic boundaries between religion, terrorism, and social movements. Indeed, signalling theory crosses the major boundary between social sciences and biology. This is another advantage of the mechanistic approach.

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