The Meaning of Contention

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Abstract: Contention is everywhere nowadays, permeating the fabric of society and constituting an important element of many different social relationships. It is also a central topic across a wide range of social scientific disciplines. Following the most contentious decade in over a century, scholarship on the topic of "contention" is booming. Nonetheless, we still lack a conceptual approach to "contention" as a general academic term beyond the bounds of the study of "contentious politics." What is the meaning of contention? Drawing on a decade of editorial and research work on contention, this article surveys the profound breadth and variety of academic research on the topic, ranging from politics, psychology, and sociology to material culture, criminology, and beyond. We outline the common conceptual thread across these various areas, where "contention" generally indicates conflictual collective contests concerning competing claims.

Keywords: collective action, collective contention, contentious politics, definition of contention, social movements

Contention is everywhere nowadays. The period between 2010 and 2020 has been dubbed "the most contentious decade" in 120 years, and the current decade may well be set to beat it.[1] Undeterred and perhaps even facilitated by a global pandemic and two years of lockdown measures, civilians, states, corporations, and many other forces of power have been relentlessly contesting the status quo. It is thus also no surprise that if you cast your eyes across contemporary scholarship, the study of contention is perhaps more visible than ever before.

Despite this state of affairs, scholars have generally avoided defining "contention" for its own sake. Perhaps even more ironic is the fact that for the past decade we have edited a journal titled *Contention* while neglecting to specify what the term meant.

Rather, we have often gestured loosely toward a family of phenomena surrounding (but not limited to) the intersection of social protest, resistance, collective action, and contentious politics. We have invited scholars to study activists, social movements, protests, revolutions, collective mobilizations, and the various processes of social change in which they intervene or partake. The contributions we have received in response have been in equal parts educational and invigorating, showing us the profound breadth and utility of the study of contention as an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary endeavor. After a decade of publishing scholarship about contention, written by scholars and practitioners across disciplines and around the world, we are beginning to understand more deeply what it actually means to study it. And therefore, in this article, we try to communicate what we have learned in a way that—we hope—may be of service to scholars working across disciplinary divides.

In what follows, we offer a conceptual sketch of contention as it is studied today. This is not an attempt to retheorize the very notion of contention, but rather constitutes an effort to represent the state of the field and to help guide scholars' engagement with research on the subject across a wide variety of disciplines. We begin by taking a ranging approach to conceptualization: exploring a variety of different fields, discussing how contention has been engaged with in these fields, and what the term means (or does not) in these various disciplinary contexts. These include classic strongholds of research on contention, such as politics and sociology, alongside fields in which the study of contention has taken its own disciplinarily specific path, such as psychology, material culture, and criminology. Reflecting on the various

approaches across fields, we trace a common thread between them, a concept of contention as "conflictual collective contests concerning competing claims."

Contentious Politics and Political Contention

When we think of the word "contention" in a scholarly context, politics is never far behind. This is for good reason. Not only are "contentious" matters often politicized in some form or other, but the framework through which the study of contention was first promulgated was an explicitly political one. Perhaps the most famous definition of contentious politics is the one offered in the book *Dynamics of Contention* (2001: 4), written by Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly. Here, the term refers to

> episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants. Roughly translated, the definition refers to collective political struggle.

At this point in time, "contentious politics" was intended to be a highly technical term, referring to an object of study particular to a special ontological and epistemological orientation, grounded in relational social science, mechanistic explanations of social phenomena, and political process theories (Tilly 2008: xv). It was differentiated from the more general study of "political contention," a looser term used to refer to "a host of distinct topical literatures—revolutions, social movements, industrial conflict, war, interest group politics, nationalism, [and] democratization," which at that time lacked the vocabulary or techniques for synthesis between them (McAdam et al. 2001: 6; see also Tilly 1997: 58).

While this approach had highly meritorious attributes, it was the notion of "contentious politics" itself that truly sparked the imaginations of scholars beyond the community of revolution and social movement theorists from which *Dynamics of Contention*'s authors hailed.[2] Accordingly, as the study of contentious politics expanded to include a greater range of phenomena and scholars with varied ontologies and epistemologies, some of the more stringent aspects of this definition were de-emphasized by its maintainers, as we see in a later, shorter, version offered by Charles Tilly (2008: 5):

> Contentious politics involves [collective] interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else's interests, in which governments appear either as targets, initiators of claims or third parties.

This later definition of contentious politics relaxes the suggestion that these collective interactions should be episodic or public, and decenters the role of governments. This is probably the best representation of how "contentious politics" is usually defined in scholarly discourse today. Yet, other political scientists and international relations scholars working on the topic have also sought to describe it in an array of alternative ways, evoking—at least in part—the looser notion of "political contention" that Tilly and colleagues were seeking to systematize. For Stephen Orvis and Carol Ann Drogus, for example, "contentious politics" simply refers to "political activity that is at least in part beyond institutional bounds [in which] . . . Groups form over grievances and demand change" (2019: 220). For Eric Selbin (Forthcoming), by contrast, contentious politics concerns "claims for change made on, of and from the socio-political and economic order." Common to all these various renditions of contentious politics, as well as these looser notions of political contention, are the notions that claim-making entities compete

politically to make their demands heard, and indeed come into conflict over a given phenomenon by transgressing the politically available pathways for institutionalized amicable resolutions.

Sociological Conceptions of Contention

While political scientists have readily taken up the study of "contentious politics" and "political contention," the notion of contention has also been "sociologized" in a wide variety of ways beyond the politically bounded definition famously offered by McAdam and colleagues (2001). One such differential interpretation—Tilly's (1995) own notion of "collective" or "popular" contention—actually precedes the advent of the *Dynamics of Contention* paradigm, and doubtless went on to influence it. Here, "collective contention" is considered as a particular form of collective action ("discontinuous" junctures at which "people gather, act together and then disperse"). As Tilly puts it:

> Collective action as a whole includes all joint efforts on behalf of shared interests. Not all of it is contentious: religious groups, for example, often act together to express a common devotion, sporting groups for the joy of action and of the sociability it brings, kinship groups reinforce their internal solidarity and mutual aid. Even overtly political groups often gather for banquets, festivals and testimonials. (Tilly 1995: 16–17)

In contrast to collective action, collective *contention* is differentiated by the fact that not only do people act collectively, but they also make "claims that bear on [i.e., threaten] other people's interests."

This concept of "collective contention" is quite different from the explicitly political notions of contention previously discussed. In some sense, it is broader: the involvement (however minimal) of states and government is no longer essential to the proceedings. Yet, in

others it is far narrower: “collective” contention refers only to discontinuous instances rather than long-running processes. It was beginning with “collective contention”—rather than “contentious politics”—that Tilly would develop his highly influential notions of “repertoires of contention” and “contentious performances,” which would in turn come to influence other fields, such as work on protest symbolism.[3]

But what about a broader definition of contention that extends both outside the context of collective action and beyond the realm of contentious politics? Amid a more general scholarly silence on this topic, Tilly (2008) briefly reflected on this task in his final book, *Contentious Performances*. Observing in the book’s opening chapter that “most contention . . . occurs outside of politics,” he sought to outline the concept’s most minimal foundations:

> Contention involves making claims that bear on someone else’s interests. . . . from small matters like which football team we should support to bigger questions such as whether grandpa rightly divided his inheritance among us, his heirs. But it also takes place in chess matches, competition among retail stores, and struggles of defense lawyers with presiding judges.
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> In the simplest version of contention, one party makes claims on another. . . . but claims range from timid requests to strident demands to direct attacks, just so long as they would, if realized, somehow affect the object’s well-being, the object’s interests. Often three or more parties are involved, as when you demand that your sister pay you back the money she was about to hand over to a friend. Contention always brings together subjects, objects, and claims. (Tilly 2008: 5–6)

Tilly paints a very broad picture of how contention manifests in society, showing how the concept could potentially apply to any contest of competing claims. Yet, we would be mistaken to imagine that he was suggesting that sociologists studying contention *beyond* the political realm set their sights on discrete interpersonal competition of the sorts Tilly details in his "simplest version." As Tilly (1999: 261) himself put it: "The point of sociology is to describe and explain social processes." Accordingly, when sociologists study contention they are almost never attending to instances in which competing claims are contested among only two or three people, but rather to instances where contests relate in some way to collective life—affecting or involving the wider social world in a meaningful way.

In this vein, sociological inquiry has employed the concept of contention in a number of fashions over the past decade. These include attempts to engage the concept of contention to "specifically examine the intersection between race and media" (Smith and Thakore 2016: 1), to examine processes of habitus transformation, taste-making, and identity renegotiation among social groups in conflict with themselves or others (Chandler 2016; Chandler and Wiborg 2020), and to explicate the enforcement of moral norms and collective adjudication of moral claims in areas ranging from foul play among sportsmen to high-level ethical debates across populations (Anderson 2014). Notably—as we saw in the case of political contention—in none of these examples do contests between claims-makers occur without conflict.

The Psychology of Contention

The psychological study of contention has quite a history (Travaglino 2014). The psychological dynamics underlying popular contention were first articulated under the guise of collective behavior by authors such as Gustave Le Bon ([1895] 1968), William Kornhauser (1959), and Eric Hoffer (1951). These authors tended to equate the psychology of masses, crowds, and

movements to “abnormal psychology,” and did not substantially differentiate between claims-based contests and other forms of popular action. Owing to an insidious mix of personal pathology and social breakdown, individuals who took part in contention were said to be chiefly driven by irrationality, mental deficits, and uncontrollable emotions. Collective behavior could not—they reasoned—be dignified with political meaning because politics is sustained by rationality (for them an attribute of the individual, not of the crowd, mob, or masses).

This early untenable emphasis on pathology and irrationality meant that, for several decades, psychologists’ understanding of contention gave way to concepts imported from political sociology, such as resource mobilization and political opportunity structures. Beyond the political realm, however, scholars of “intergroup relations” sought to understand how groups with competing claims engaged in disputes with one another. Such instances—termed “intergroup conflict” or “intergroup contention”—ranged from low-intensity “everyday” disquiet such as religious and ethnic tension or status-based contention to high-intensity violent outbursts and even protracted group-based warfare (Colwell 2007; Fisher 2000; Tajfel and Turner 1979; Weber 1994). This literature drew attention to group-based beliefs, identities, and norms that shaped intergroup relationships, attitudes, and conduct, and sought to understand how these factors might determine how constructively or destructively conflicts between groups could be resolved, as well as the conditions under which certain groups might acquiesce to others.

By the mid-1980s, a substantial body of authors was once again explicitly engaged with the psychology of contentious *political* behavior. For instance, Bert Klandermans’s (1984) use of the “value-expectancy” framework for the study of mobilization raised the important issue of how individuals differ in their appraisals of resources and opportunities. The framework drew attention to the social and material motives underpinning individuals’ willingness to participate

in political action as well as the role of beliefs about the outcomes of participation and the values bestowed by individuals on such outcomes. Since this time, a renewed focus on the psychological analysis of political contention has brought about the formulation of several theoretical models exploring the role of individuals' social identities, emotions, ideologies, and other motives in the context of contention (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2017). These models of "social protest" accompany and complement more structurally oriented accounts by addressing why some individuals are more (or less) likely to engage in collective contention. For instance, the Dynamic Dual Pathway Model of collective action (Van Zomeren et al. 2012) conceives of protesters as "passionate economists" whose actions depend on the relevance of the group to the self. Individuals who identify as members of disadvantaged groups are driven by their anger at the group's treatment and their sense that the group can achieve social change. Conversely, when the group is not perceived as central to their self-definition, individuals engage in a range of cost-benefit calculations to decide whether to mobilize. Alternative psychological approaches have addressed the role of ideologies and system-level appraisals to explain the factors that may boost acceptance of the status quo and acquiescence in the face of injustice (Badaan et al. 2018).

Overall, the field of psychology has built a substantial knowledge base of the processes linked to mobilization and acquiescence in contentious scenarios ranging from intergroup contention, to large-scale contentious politics. Notably, however, a general focus on groups and individuals has meant that less theorizing has been devoted to the linkage between psychological and macro-processes, or the dynamic interactions between specific contextual features and individual actions (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2017). In line with the focus on broader psychological mechanisms, the field has interchangeably employed terms such as "collective

action/behavior" and "intergroup conflict" for instances that are less evidently political and "political mobilization" or "political behavior" for those circumstances that are, as well as the term "social protest" for those in-between.

The Visual and Material Culture of Contention

Despite the relevance of visual and material culture to the study of contention, the "stuff" of contention has all too often been neglected by scholars outside of this field. And yet, the physical stuff of contention plays a range of important roles in situations where causes or groups come into conflict over some claim or other. As Mark Traugott (2010) effectively outlined in his historical analysis of revolutionary barricades, the use of physical objects in contentious episodes goes well beyond their functional utility, and can even involve making declarations about the nature of social phenomena. Barricades in Paris speak not only abstractly of revolution, but also evoke 1789, 1830, and 1848. Similarly, the sheer ubiquity of placards at demonstrations renders the placard itself a signifier of protest (Gardner and Abrams Forthcoming 1).

Some important case-specific aspects of the visual and material culture of contention have received highly productive targeted attention. Shannon Black (2017) explores the roles played by the Pussyhat Project in recent feminist activism. Bret Edwards (2011) traces the history of the megaphone from an instrument of male power to a symbol of political protest. Younes Saramifar (2017) unpacks the complex systems of meaning attached to the AK47 used by Hezbollah militants. Nevertheless, the subfield remains characterized by a lack of disciplinary cross-pollination, as these three articles—located within political geography, history, and anthropology, respectively—exemplify. Yet, studies focusing on highly prevalent objects such as flags (Bryan 2007; Pineda and Sowards 2007), banners (Oleinik 2015), and placards (Alekseevsky 2011; Bowcher 2012; Mayer et al. 2015) remain largely limited to analyses of their

written and/or symbolic content. Likewise, in the first decade of *Contention* several articles published in the journal have contributed to this subfield. Jillian Schwedler (2020) explored the relationship between protest and the materiality of the built environment, contending that infrastructural development over time had rendered urban spaces less conducive to collective events. In the special issue "Creative Practices/Resistant Acts" (5.1), an interdisciplinary cohort of scholars spoke to "the power of art and creative acts in fuelling global mobilizations, destabilizing hegemonic narratives of oppression, and reclaiming people's sense of empowerment, belonging, and identity" (Hussein and MacKenzie 2017: 2). In this special issue, the visual and material culture of contention was addressed in particular through Ayman El-Desouky's (2017) and Sotiropoulos's (2017) work on art in the occupation of the public square—Egypt's Tahrir and Greece's Syntagma, respectively.

We hope to see the further expansion and maturation of visual and material culture studies of contention in years to come. One exciting area of prospective collaboration concerns the intersection of political contention with material culture. In the edited volume *Symbolic Objects in Contentious Politics*, Benjamin Abrams and Peter R. Gardner (Forthcoming) call for a more unified and interdisciplinary engagement in this field of inquiry. Contributions to this edited volume explore topics such as streets, shoes, bodies, and statues [4].

The Criminology of Contention

A criminological lens applied to the study of contention has the potential to push the field in novel and hitherto underexplored directions. Contentious politics often involves instances where groups alter relationships of power and/or challenge the legitimacy and sovereignty of the state. Thus, crimes—which challenge (or sometimes recruit) governmental authority in their commission—can become a tool for dissent against the powerful and other forms of claim-

making. Typical examples are the actions of groups such as gangs, mafias, pirates, and hackers. These groups often employ collective violence (whether real or virtual) to disrupt the functioning of authorities while casting themselves as the protectors of communities. Research examining public attitudes toward hackers has demonstrated that individuals are prone to perceive these groups positively when they personally lack the psychological resources to engage in direct forms of political action (Heering et al. 2020; Travaglino 2017). Research has also started investigating contention in relation to criminal groups. Specifically, this body of work has focused on the legitimization of criminal governance by (Travaglino et al. Forthcoming) and intentions to engage in collective action against mafias in Italy (Travaglino et al. 2016). The study of contentious dynamics in the context of criminal groups' authority is an especially fruitful development because it requires widening the notion of ideology to address the values and meaning that may sustain the power of illegal authorities in society (Travaglino and Abrams 2019).

From the perspective of authorities, contention may sometimes become a form of deviant behavior. This is especially true when protesters call into question the state's monopoly on force by employing radical and violent strategies. The study of political violence is an especially fertile terrain for criminological approaches (e.g., LaFree and Freilich 2019). Scholars have examined the socio-demographic characteristics related to radicalization (Wolfowicz et al. 2021), the role of radical networks and other available ties (Bélanger et al. 2020), and the cultural values that may drive violent political intentions against the state (Travaglino and Moon 2020; Travaglino and Moon Forthcoming). Conversely, criminological backlash models have theorized the way that state response can increase the likelihood of violence by depriving individuals of alternative channels to put their political grievances forward (LaFree et al. 2009).

Relatedly, an additional relevant area where criminological insights are extremely valuable concerns the practices, antecedents, and implications of the criminalization of social protest. During the recent COVID-19 lockdowns, many governments banned gatherings and protests, effectively criminalizing dissent for large swathes of the population (Kampmark 2020). In China, the state implemented a "security law" in Hong Kong that severely limits individuals' ability to express dissent against the government, while also enhancing surveillance methods on the mainland (Dedman and Lai 2021). It is still unclear what the long-term consequences of these new configurations of state power will be, and how authorities' response to protest and dissent will be altered in the long run.

As this brief overview illustrates, there are several crucial insights that can be drawn from criminological approaches to contention. These range from the way in which authorities use crime and legal structures to politicize and stigmatize aspects of everyday life to the use of crime by disempowered groups to implicitly or explicitly undermine governmental authority, to opposition against criminal authorities that displace the state. Such insights are promising, but they have yet to be fully explored, and additional empirical and theoretical work is needed to systematically formulate the various ways in which crime can intersect with the study of contention (Ruggiero 2005).

The Common Thread

The study of contention is now a truly multidisciplinary enterprise. Yet, each domain of research offers a slightly different approach to and understanding of contention. Political research on contention places a key emphasis on governments' role as the enactors, targets, or—at the very least—overbearing bystanders in a given contest. By contrast, a wider sociological literature on contention uses the term in an exceptionally open sense across a wide variety of objects of study

in which collective claims-based conflicts arise. Psychologists, meanwhile, examine contention as a form of claims-making collective behavior or intergroup process, as well as from the perspective of "social protest" behaviors. Research on symbolism, material culture, and contention, contrastingly, places its focus on the way in which objects, language, and performances can articulate claims in unique and effective ways. Finally, a criminological perspective on contention extends it beyond those circumstances where we would consider a political process to have reached its conclusion, as well as into contexts where behavior would be conventionally regarded as politically illegitimate. Of course, these are far from the only arenas in which the study of contention occurs.

To give a few more examples: anthropologists study contention as a means of "challenging and transforming unequal power relations on different levels" within a kin group or institution, or across conventional boundaries (Rasch et al. 2022: 9; Van der Hout 2022). Pedagogical research engages contention as an element in the learning process, encompassing teaching styles, modes of attention, and resistant practices (Boelsbjerg and Katan 2022; Olivieri 2022; Rasch 2022). Scholars and practitioners working in artistic and literary spaces have sought to comprehend how creative practices ranging from graffiti to poetry can involve and exhibit contention (Dalaqua 2020; Hussein 2013; Rooney 2017; Soliman 2011).

Across all these different interpretations of and approaches to contention, there are a few common elements worth drawing out. The first of these is that they all involve situations in which people with or without power in a given situation seek to make *claims* (a) about or on things in the world; or (b) about or on people. Moreover, they all feature circumstances where these claims *compete* with one another (as Tilly would have put it, each claim "bear[s] on someone else's interests" [2008: 5]). These attributes offer us the foundations of contention as a

multidisciplinary object of study. Yet, competing claims alone are not necessarily contentious. They must also be subject to a *contest* of sorts, in which their competing nature is made manifest. This may occur in various forms, ranging from classic protest movements to symbolic resistance efforts, and from highly visible status-based conflicts between or within organizations and social groups to criminal battles arising predominantly outside the public eye.

A contest of competing claims may not necessarily always be contentious in nature. Rather, there may well be amicable contests that resolve these competing claims. These might include formal arbitration proceedings, bets, trade negotiations, or tests of skill. Hence, these contests must also be *conflictual*. Here too, we see remarkable similarity across perspectives. Whether in the frequent use of state force across political contention, from protest to crime, or in the fierce symbolic violence enacted in contentious visual displays, or in the various high and low tenor forms of intergroup conflict, we find conflictual relations at the heart of scholarship on contention.

Finally, we have the question of scope. The kinds of contests discussed in research on contention is never contained only to a series of individuals (such as an interpersonal fracas, bar fight, or rivalry); rather, these contests also arise from or at least *involve* broader social groups. Thus, they are also *collective*. Tilly's first run at conceptualizing contention even made this explicit by situating it as a particular form of collective action. So too does the notion of contentious politics expressly refer to "collective interactions" (Tarrow 2013) in its various formal definitions. Likewise, psychological, criminological, and sociological work on contention consistently refers to competitions between groups or over status and control within them. So too do the symbolic and material cultural aspects of contention leverage collective understandings in the process of claims-making.

Combining these various common factors gives us the central thread across present-day research on contention: conflictual collective contests concerning competing claims. This conceptualization runs the gamut from research on footwear as resistance (Dirik Forthcoming) to the maintenance of normative concepts of racialized behavior (Chandler 2016), all while still centring classics like Tilly's work on claims-making through collective action in Great Britain (1995) and the *Dynamics of Contention* initiative (McAdam et al. 2001).

It bears repeating that the above notion of contention is the result of a synthetic—rather than analytic—process of conceptualization. We are seeking to reflect a multidisciplinary field rather than to discern what contention would truly mean if we were to subject the concept to rigorous logical deconstruction. If we were to do so, we would find that there is, in fact, no single meaning of contention, only meanings. Hence, "contention" is a moving target, a familial object of study whose members will continue to exhibit new traits and may eventually eschew old ones. Perhaps, one day, the study of contention will de-emphasize its collective or conflictual attributes. Alternatively, it might one day come to include instances in which it is very hard to exactly recognize what kind of "claim" is being made, but where conflictual collective contests nonetheless arise, such as the cases of crime waves and cults once termed "expressive social movements" (Blumer 1962). Our mission as editors of *Contention* has been and remains to follow contention wherever scholars might find it, and to cultivate and sustain discussion across disciplines, so that we might all expand our repertoires.

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Notes

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1. This has been affirmed in various forms by Erica Chenoweth's reports and updates on the NAVCO data project. (See, e.g., Chenoweth 2016).

2. See Abrams (2019, 2021) for a discussion of the longer-run trajectory taken by fields such as revolution studies.

3. For a more extensive discussion of Tilly's conceptualization of contention and his broader legacy, see Tarrow (2008).

[4] These can be found in the following chapters: streets, (Accornero et al. Forthcoming), shoes (Dirik Forthcoming), bodies (Zawilski Forthcoming; Zuev Forthcoming), and statues (Atata and Omobowale Forthcoming; Gardner and Abrams Forthcoming 2)