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How Imagination Takes Power. The Motivational Foundations of Collective Action in Social Movement Mobilization

Thomas Kestler *

Abstract: »Die Macht der Imagination. Explikationen zu den motivationalen Grundlagen kollektiven Handelns am Beispiel sozialer Bewegungen«. The foundations of collective action and agency in large groups remain a challenging theoretical problem. Why are individuals willing to contribute to a common goal, even though their contribution may have little impact? This paper aims to answer this question by explicating the motivational mechanisms that facilitate collective action and elucidating the underlying conditions and processes using social movement mobilization as an example. The mechanisms responsible for modifying motivation and action orientations in large-scale collective action are explicated at the level of individual structures of intentionality and specified as imagination and plural self-awareness. These mechanisms create the mental prerequisites for collective action by modifying two crucial determinants of action orientations: self-efficacy and intentional control. Recurring to the case of the German environmental movement, we demonstrate that collective agency arises when a shared imaginary takes shape, and plural self-awareness gives way to common action orientations through the catalyzing effect of an external synchronizing stimulus.

Keywords: Collective action, collective actors, collective intentionality, imagination, mobilization, plural self-awareness, social movements.

1. Introduction

Long-standing theorizing in the fields of organizational theory, sociological institutionalism, and institutional economics has yielded valuable insights into the nature and substance of collective action and agency. According to Weber, collective action is defined by the fact that its subjective meaning – the ideas or beliefs an acting individual attaches to it – relate to and take

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account of the (anticipated) behavior of others (Weber 1978, 4). Action, therefore, is social if it takes place within a socially defined context of meaning. In a stricter sense, collective action means that groups act uniformly in the pursuance of a common goal. It goes beyond the mere coordination of individual goals, as it happens between car drivers on a crossroads or sellers and buyers in a market. Individuals in a group not only adapt their individual actions to their social environment and to the anticipated actions of others, but they perceive a common goal as their own and contribute actively to the achievement of that goal. This begs the question of motivation on part of group members. On what grounds are individuals motivated to act in accordance with a group goal? The aim of this article is to provide an answer to this question, first, by explicating the motivational mechanisms underlying collective action on the level of individual structures of intentionality and, second, by elucidating the conditions that facilitate collective agency by the example of social movement mobilization.

The motives of individuals to act collectively are widely debated in multiple disciplines. They are attributed either to shared values (see, e.g., Salice 2016), to rational calculus (Hardin 1982; Elster 1989), to conventions and mutual obligations (e.g., Gilbert 2014), or to intrinsic norms of collaboration (Etzioni 1988; Tomasello 2012). Similar debates surround the concept of collective agency, which refers to a group's structurally (or institutionally) ingrained capacity of collective action. Pettit (2003) speaks of collective agents as "social integrators" and differentiates them from mere aggregations of people by the conditions of a shared purpose and a "degree of constancy" as well as a "degree of coherence" in the pursuit of that purpose. Economists regard collective agency as resulting from coordinative equilibria and institutionally defined incentive structures (Knight and Sened 1995; North 1990). Historical institutionalists put stronger emphasis on the structural environment in which collective actors are embedded. They focus on historical legacies and factors like sunk costs and processes of habituation (Immergut 1998; Thelen 2004). Sociologists, by contrast, emphasize the importance of either social norms or taken for granted schemas and typifications for constituting collective agents (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Berger and Luckmann 1967). There is, therefore, a broad range of answers to the question "how the individuals in the group are motivated to do 'their part' of (what will be) the collective action" as Chant (2018, 21) puts it.

What most approaches have in common, however, is the assumption that the mechanisms underlying collective action and the conditions producing collective agency do not depend on group size. Sociologists explain macro-collectives by recourse to micro-level mechanisms like socialization, internalization, and objectivation. Economic institutionalists conceive of group-agents of all sizes as aggregations of micro-level choices and cost-benefit-calculations. Yet, group size matters. This point is made most clearly by Mancur

Olson (1971), who shows that the logic of individual action cannot be carried over to the collective level by mere aggregation. Similarly, Pettit points to “discontinuities between collective judgements and intentions, on the one hand, and the judgements and intentions of [group] members, on the other” (2003, 184). Indeed, it is difficult to see why group members should make an active contribution to the achievement of goals like building a pyramid or flying to the moon. After all, most of the individuals who bear the costs of these endeavors by pooling their resources will not benefit from being buried in a pyramid or from flying to the moon. While the members of small groups can be easily monitored and provided with direct benefits, these mechanisms lose their effect in large groups. With growing group size, social norms become more difficult to enforce and cost-benefit calculations turn negative for group members the more the net effect of each individual contribution tends towards zero. This is possibly the reason why, usually, high-cost collective action like painting a house or pushing a bus are associated with small groups, while large groups on the scale of a province or a nation are supposed to engage in low-cost activities like casting a vote in an election, joining a party, or donating small sums to a non-profit organization. This kind of division of labor, however, hardly masks the discontinuities in action motivation as one moves from the micro level to the macro level. For one, the costs even of “cheap” activities like voting by far exceed the effective influence any single vote has on the outcome of an election. Secondly, there are also large groups who engage in high-cost collective action like waging a war or building a welfare state.

Examples of high-cost, large-scale collective action can be found particularly in social movements and protest movements, which often go along with intense, seemingly selfless engagement of their members. For example, testimonies from the civil rights movement in the United States give proof to a consummate kind of dedication to the movement’s cause: “We saw ourselves, black and white together, as a ‘band of brothers and sisters’ and ‘a circle of trust.’ The spirit that united us [...] was such that we would have died for one another” (cited in Eyerman and Jamison 1991, 123). In the 1964 campaign of Republican candidate Barry Goldwater, conservative activists “felt so strongly about the issues in that campaign that they were willing to lose tremendous amounts of money, to lose their business. Many of them, really, almost destroyed themselves” (Kabaservice 2012, 91).

Social movements, therefore, most clearly reveal the discontinuities in the structure of motivation between the individual and the collective level. Moreover, given their low degree of institutionalization, group agency is not (yet) organizationally established by mechanisms of aggregation, delegation, and formal procedures as in the case of corporate actors (see Gehring and Marx 2023, introduction to this special issue), but exercised informally and *ad hoc* by all group members. This renders social movements crucial cases for

observing the motivational foundations of collective action on the individual level, which are easily overlooked when focusing on small groups, on corporate actors, or on low-cost activities. These motivational foundations not only entail the meaning structures that guide and coordinate action (in the sense of switchmen), but also the motivational force that drives action.

Collectivizing motivation, however, challenges Weber's individualistic account of social facts. As one departs from the Scylla of methodological individualism, the Charybdis of collectivism lurks (Schwinn 2007). Slipping into methodological collectivism would mean conceiving collective action as subject-free manifestation of a kind of group mind, which is ontologically implausible. To resolve this dilemma and to reconcile the logic of collective action with an individualistic ontology, it is necessary "to bring psychology back into the picture," as Hodgson (2007, 101) notes, and to develop a "micro-theory of how social structures affect, and are affected by, individual purposes or dispositions" (100). This concerns, in the first place, the structures of intentionality underlying collective action.

Any kind of action derives from intentional states, which are, ultimately, realized in individuals. As Salice and Schmid (2016, 10, referring to Scheler) put it: "[I]f one has to account for the formation of groups, one has to look into what is going on in the minds of the individuals who are the members of those groups." Hence, the mechanisms responsible for modifying action orientations in collective contexts will be specified in this article on the level of individual structures of intentionality. These mechanisms are imagination and plural self-awareness, which are supposed to create the mental requirements for collective action by modifying two crucial determinants of action orientations: self-efficacy and intentional control. In sections two and three it will be shown how imagination creates a sense of self-efficacy in collective action and how plural self-awareness shifts intentional control to the collective level.¹ Section four turns to the example of the German environmental movement to demonstrate the relevance of these mechanisms in a concrete historical context. Recurring to Benedict Anderson's account of imagined communities, the conditions of collective action and agency will be identified. The article concludes with a summary and an outlook.

2. Imagination: Collectivizing the Intentional Structure of Beliefs and Desires

Collective action is predicated on the motivation of group members to do "their part," which requires a sense of self-efficacy in achieving the common

¹ These two sections are based on a monograph and an article dealing with the same subject (Kestler 2022, 2023).

goal. In large groups, this condition is lacking because the contribution of any individual group member is insignificant for collective action to succeed. To create the necessary sense of self-efficacy in collective action, individuals' perception of themselves and their role as group members needs to be modified. The corresponding mechanism, the imaginative creation of a collective intentional subject, will be explicated in the following paragraphs.

Self-efficacy is defined by Bandura as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (1995, 2). Without beliefs in the capability of bringing about a desired state, motivation to act will not arise. At the same time, beliefs alone are not enough. According to Hume's formula, motivation to act rests on two conditions: beliefs and desires. Desire describes the motivational passion that turns "cold beliefs" into the kind of "hot cognition" required for generating action (cf. Radcliffe 1999). For the fox to reach for the grapes, both a feeling of hunger as well as a belief in the accessibility of the desired food are necessary conditions (Elster 1983). The same conditions can be assumed to apply to group action. The motivation to move a piano upstairs is conditioned by the desire to accomplish that goal as well as the belief in the feasibility of the task, stemming from the mutual commitment between group members. Commitments and shared knowledge about everyone else's disposition to collaborate can afford a sense of self-efficacy in collective action. Moreover, commitments create mutual obligations and entitlements that not only exert additional motivational force, but also strengthen the belief in the cooperative behavior of other group members (Gilbert 2006). Accordingly, Tuomela's and Miller's (1988) conception of We-intentions rests on mutual beliefs that all group members will do their part and that the joint action, therefore, will succeed. We-intentions in that sense refer to the common goal (to move the piano upstairs, for example), while the contributory action of each group member is intended in the I-mode (cf. Tollefsen 2014).

Commitments and mutual beliefs, however, have their limitations in generating motivation to act. They cannot account for cases in which individuals assume disproportionate costs. Moreover, self-efficacy requires a significant level of influence on the part of the acting individual to achieve the common goal. In large groups, this influence is lacking. Knowing about the contribution of others does not render individual action more effective – to the contrary: a strong commitment of other group members increases the opportunity for freeriding. In such cases, individualized conceptions of contributory action are insufficient. From "We intend to X" does not follow "I intend to do my part of X," as Tuomela and Miller assume. To establish a motivational link between a collective goal and individual action, beliefs and desires need to be collectivized on a more fundamental level, including the structure of intentionality. For that purpose, further considerations on

intentional states in general and on the intentional state of imagination in particular are required.

Intentionality is defined by Searle as “that feature of the mind by which it is directed *at*, or *about*, or *of* objects and states of affairs in the world” (Searle 2015, 13). Intentions are “had” by individuals, the intentional subjects, and they are directed at intentional objects. Intentions, therefore, have a direction of fit. Beliefs have a mind-to-the-world direction of fit because they aim at creating mental representations of objects in the world. Desires have the opposite direction of fit because they aim at fitting the outside world to the mental content. The desire to eat aims at getting access to the grapes. This desire is satisfied by reaching for the grapes. If the grapes are hanging too high, the desire to eat them has failed. Whether intentions succeed or fail depends on their conditions of satisfaction – truth conditions for beliefs, fulfillment conditions for desires (Searle 1995, 129).

Intentional states like beliefs, hopes, or desires constitute a relationship between the mind and the world, with perceptions connecting both spheres and providing the conditions an intentional state requires to be satisfied. Conditions of satisfaction are predicated on perceptions of states of the world. The intention of believing that it is 6 a.m. and time to get up is satisfied by a glance at the clock. As reflections of real-world referents, perceptions are true by definition because their content is caused by the objects they reflect (Searle 1983, 2010, 2015). Intentions, therefore, are tied to the factual world, which sets limits to their possible range. I may well believe that I am an athletic person, but the experience of a running or a swimming competition eventually makes it difficult for me to sustain this belief. With the accumulation of experiences, the range of conceivable beliefs, hopes, or desires becomes more restricted. Once I experienced that my favorite restaurant is closed on Mondays, the desire to eat there on that day will not arise anymore. Searle calls the stock of knowledge stemming from previous intentions the “Background” and describes it as those “capacities, dispositions, tendencies, practices, and so on that enable the intentionality to function” (Searle 2010, 155). As social psychologists have shown, mental processes are geared towards maintaining consistency, which means that actual thinking and behavior takes account of previous intentions and commitments (Festinger 1962). It is because of these commitments and constraints that one cannot command someone to believe, to hope, or to desire something (Searle 2010, 40).

This does not apply to imaginations, which constitute special kinds of intentional states. The claim “Imagine!” makes perfect sense. Obviously, imaginations are not subject to the same constraints as other intentional states are. The main difference lies in the fact that imaginative mental contents have no referent in the physical world. Imaginations are mental creations, which include not just Santa Claus or unicorns, but also the *demos*, the nation, God, the saints, paradise, climate change, gross domestic product, or the class

struggle. What these objects have in common is their mental origin. They are decoupled from, or at least take priority over, real-world referents and so do all kinds of intentional states (beliefs, fears, hopes, or desires) that are related to these objects. This raises the question of how such an intentional state can be satisfied. If imaginations are not linked to states of the world, what are the conditions for such beliefs, fears, hopes, or desires to be satisfied?

According to Searle, imaginations are not supposed to be satisfied. He equates them to fictions, assuming that “the commitment to the conditions of satisfaction are deliberately suspended” (Searle 1983, 18), which comes close to Ricoeur’s conception of imagination. According to Ricoeur, it is “the non-existence of the object of the fiction” that marks the difference between mental representations (of real-world objects) and imaginations (1979, 126). He sees imagination as a space, where potential courses of action can be tried out and where reality as such can be contested – as a kind of mental playing ground, with the playing mind being fully aware of the difference between imagination and reality.

This, however, is often not the case. The existence of a nation or a demos are experienced as real by many people and endowed with the same status of facticity as the time displayed by the clock. Otherwise, imaginations could not orientate (collective) action and, thereby, become “productive” in shaping social reality, as Ricoeur (1979) himself emphasizes. In fact, imaginations *do* have real consequences and, therefore, are to be regarded as full-fledged intentional states. Benedict Anderson provides impressive examples of the productive power of imagination in his study of imagined communities. He points to the strong attachment people “feel for the inventions of their imaginations” and the fact that they are even “ready to die for these inventions.” He shows that the imagination of the nation transcends individual beliefs and desires, inspiring an intimate sense of community, “the beauty of *gemeinschaft*,” which implies a total shift in the structure of intentionality, including the intentional subject and conditions of satisfaction (Anderson 1983, 141-3). Imaginations of this kind not just entail an intentional object – the nation, paradise, or a communist society – but also the corresponding intentional subject – the people, the community of the faithful, or the working class. This means that intentional states such as hopes, beliefs, or desires no longer occur in the first person singular. The intentional subject takes on the form of a collective actor – something, which Charles Taylor supposedly has in mind when he speaks of “metatopical agency” (Taylor 2004). Acting in a group becomes acting as a group; the intentional subject shifts from the individual to the collective level and renders actions like voting genuinely collective in nature.²

² For a discussion of the subject-structure of We-intentions, see Schmid (2018).

But how can intentional states like believing in the unity of the working class or the strength of the nation be satisfied? As there is no referent of these mental contents in the world, perceptions can hardly provide the necessary conditions of satisfaction. A solution can be found in the fact that the states of affairs in the world are not fixated. Rather, they can be selected and manipulated to fit the imaginative content. This is what happens with symbols, figurative representations, or ritualized practices. A cathedral provides a perceptual reference to a religious imaginary and a mass rally serves as evidence of a party's or a nation's power. Accidental events can also play an important role in satisfying imaginative intentional states. For instance, the anti-nuclear movement regarded the nuclear disaster in Chernobyl in 1986 as irrefutable proof of the risks inherent in nuclear technology (Kestler 2022). Notably, the disaster did not prove anything given the specific conditions and circumstances of its occurrence. Its importance and far-reaching consequences resulted from the fact that it provided the conditions of satisfaction to the imaginary of the anti-nuclear movement and, thereby, made its beliefs "come true." Thus, imaginative intentional states have conditions of satisfaction, too, in the kind of symbols, practices, or events that provide perceptual anchors and give substance to imaginative mental contents.

If imagination involves all components of intentional states, including a collective intentional subject and conditions of satisfaction, genuine We-intentions become possible. Not only the propositional content of an intention (to carry a piano upstairs) can be collectivized, but also the acting subject. When the contributory action of each group member is carried out in the We-mode, subjectivity becomes collective. The mechanism of imagination, therefore, allows resolving the puzzle of self-efficacy in large groups because the members of a group perceive themselves as collective agents capable of bringing about the shared goal of, say, saving the nation or electing a new government. Crucially, collective imaginaries are fully compatible with an individualistic social ontology because they do not presuppose a group mind or an emergent social force. They are produced by individual minds because they are experienced as liberating and empowering. In the realm of imagination, everything becomes possible. For imagined giants, the grapes come close, and for an imagined community, it becomes possible to change the course of history. Imaginations, therefore, fundamentally alter the parameters of motivation and action. By conferring a sense of self-efficacy to group members, they turn cold beliefs into hot desires.

Still, beliefs, hopes, fears, or desires are merely mental states that do not immediately produce action. Believing in the capability to carry the piano and desiring to get the task done are important preconditions for action orientations to arise, but they are insufficient for bringing about an intention-in-action. Manifest collective action means to engage directly with the world through the medium of the physical body, which requires intentional control.

3. Plural Self-Awareness: Collectivizing the Intentional Structure of Action

Action orientations are not just a question of motivation, which is a mental state, but they involve the body. To reach for the grapes is, ultimately, a physical affair. Physical action requires intentional control, which is conferred by the sensual experience of the body and bodily movements. Intentional control means that the body can be used at any time for carrying out a certain task. The intention to raise my arm instantly has the effect of my arm going up – control of action is nearly perfect. This, however, implies a congruence between the body and its mental representation. If action is tied to the body and bodily control, it cannot be other than individual action of the form “I intend” (to reach for the grapes, for example). In bodily experience, individuality imposes itself. This leads into trouble as soon as an imagined collective actor engages in manifest, physical action. In that case, there is no congruence between the mental representation of the intentional subject, on the one hand, and the experience of bodily activity, on the other. Recurring to the concept of plural self-awareness, I will sketch a possible way out of this dilemma.

Bodily action implies a specific kind of intentional state, intentionality-in-action, which is not propositional as other intentional states, but causally self-referential, in Searle’s terms, because it can only be had if it is satisfied. To plan to raise my arm means creating a mental representation of my future activity, which is a matter of beliefs. Actually raising the arm, by contrast, requires intentional control stemming from an intimate awareness of the body. Intentional control circumscribes the very range of intentions a person is capable of conceiving. Baier puts it that way: “I cannot intend the sun to stop, nor can I intend to turn the moon around to see its other face” (Baier 1970, 649). I can hope for it or believe that the sun will rise in a different direction the next morning, but I cannot intend to bring it about. An intention like changing the course of the sun or turning the moon around cannot arise. In small children, this may be the case, but as soon as bodily awareness is fully developed, such an intention is not possible anymore.

The condition of intentional control poses a problem in large groups. In small groups, the common goal (of carrying a piano, say) can be shared in the way of mutual commitments, which affords a sense of self-efficacy in collective action, while the contributory action of each group member – the bodily movement required for moving the piano – remains individualized. In large groups, this conception does not apply because the condition of self-efficacy can only be accomplished through subjective collectivity, which is at odds with the condition of intentional control. Imaginations of a collective intentional subject are bound to collapse as soon as physical action is involved.

How, then, can it be that a collective imaginary gives way to manifest collective action?

A possible avenue for resolving this puzzle can be found in Searle's account of collective intentionality, which goes beyond Tuomela's and Miller's conception of We-intentions. According to Searle, collective intentions involve intentional states in their entirety. They are ontologically individualistic, but they are collective in their mental and experiential structure: "[Collective intentionality] is not the same as the summation of individual intentional behavior," he stresses (Searle 1990, 402). Instead, he conceives of collective intentions and individual intentions to contribute to the collective goal as inseparable, just as the firing of a gun by means of pulling the trigger is not a sequence of intentions, but one single intention.

Notably, collective intentionality in this sense is not just a mental phenomenon, but it involves bodily action, which is illustrated by Searle with the example of the joint preparation of a hollandaise sauce: "Suppose Jones and Smith are engaged in a piece of cooperative behavior. Suppose they are preparing a hollandaise sauce. Jones is stirring while Smith slowly pours in the ingredients" (1990, 410). Searle describes this joint action as a kind of integration or merging of action orientations: "It is not just that I am doing this and you are doing this, but we are doing this together; and this fact is represented in each of our heads in the form of collective intentionality" (Searle 2008, 446). The concept of collective intentionality, therefore, suggests that not just mental states but also intentions in action can take on a collective structure. In joint action, not only the intentional subject is shifted to the collective level, but also the acting bodies, as it supposedly happens with dancing couples or within crowds.

For understanding the corresponding mechanism, psychological research provides valuable insights. Psychologists found a strong relationship between subjective agency and bodily experience: "[T]he matching of one's intentions and the bodily effects of self-generated actions contributes to a sense of the self as agent" (Jeannerod 2003, 2). This, however, does not mean that subjective agency has necessarily an individual structure. This would only be the case if subjective agency was determined by bodily awareness, whereby the individualizing effect of bodily experience imposes itself upon the mind. Yet, if instead the mental component takes precedence in determining the sense of the self as agent, the relationship between mind and body would be inverted, with the power of imagination exerting a collectivizing influence on the body. This intuition is indeed supported by experimental psychology. It could be shown that body identification can be neurologically disturbed or manipulated in a way that detaches bodily awareness from the physical body (e.g., Blanke and Metzinger 2009; Lenggenhager et al. 2007; Vignemont 2020). This is not even a rare phenomenon. Everyday situations show that bodily awareness can quite easily be tricked. We may think, for example, of three-

dimensional cinemas or the well-known situation of sitting in a stationary train and seeing another train starting to move. These are just cursory examples and observations, but they may for the time being suffice to sustain the argument that intentional control and, consequentially, intentionality in action are not necessarily confined to the physical body.

If this premise is accepted, collective agency rests on a shift in bodily experience. Consider the phrase “What if everyone did that.” When people recur to that phrase, they seem to perceive their own action as integral part of a larger context of collective action, which would break down if they would stop acting. As Elster observes, “if people did not find the question, But what if everyone did that? a persuasive one, society would be in constant threat of disintegration” (Elster 1985, 142). Mind you there is no logical basis to this statement. Rather, its rationale is rooted in a deeper, pre-conscious layer of the mind, possibly that “preintentional sense of ‘the other’ as an actual or potential agent like oneself in cooperative activities” that Searle speaks of (1990, 413). Similarly, Schmid (2005) points to a pre-reflexive, unthematic sense of belonging as a condition of collective action. These accounts strikingly resemble the characterization of individual bodily awareness as a pre-conscious sense of agency and ownership.

What Searle and Schmid refer to, therefore, can be interpreted as a kind of collective analogue to bodily awareness.³ Such a state would allow resolving the puzzle of intentional control in group action. In the same way as the pre-intentional sensory experience of the body confers the sense of intentional control necessary for individual action,⁴ a preintentional (or “unthematic”) sense of “the other” can be assumed to shift intentional control to the group level, bringing about a collectivized kind of intentions-in-action. We may think here of a phenomenon akin to what Schmid calls “plural self-awareness” and what he describes as a “background awareness of plural selfhood,” prior to any conscious kind of intentionality, “a sort of mental integration in which the participants are aware of some of their attitudes as theirs, collectively” (Schmid 2014, 18, 19). This seems to be the case when movement activists perceive of themselves as “brothers and sisters” and affirm their willingness to make any sacrifice for the movement’s cause. Like bodily awareness, this state is pre-conscious most of the time, but it can give way to collective intentionality under certain conditions, which need to be specified further (see section 4 below).

³ Weber interprets this state as “mass suggestion.” While recognizing its relevance, he does not classify it as a social phenomenon, because it lacks the meaning structures he regards as necessary for constituting social facts. Instead, he relegates it to the discipline of mass psychology (Weber 1981).

⁴ It could be experimentally shown that any conscious action is preceded by a preconscious neurological state called “readiness-potential” (Libet 1985).

Yet, as a pre-conscious state, plural self-awareness is not directly observable. It can only be inferred indirectly from empirical instances of collective intentionality, especially during episodes of collective arousal or “moments of madness,” in Zolberg’s (1972) terms. In such moments, intentionality transcends the limits of individual cognition, which is experienced by group members as a state of enthusiasm and joy. The episodes from French history recounted by Zolberg suggest that this enthusiasm stems from a sense of empowerment and liberation from cognitive and bodily constraints: “[W]hen the carefully erected walls which compartmentalize society collapse,” a state of “political harmony” arises. A collective imaginary takes precedence over the body. “Minds and bodies are liberated; human beings feel that they are in direct touch with one another as well as with their inner selves. [...] Dreams become possibilities” (Zolberg 1972, 186, 196). In such moments of large scale collective intentionality, which frequently occur in the context of social movement mobilization, the mechanisms and conditions of collective action and agency can be observed with particular clarity.

4. From Imagination to Action: The Example of the German Environmental Movement

Action orientations hinge on two mental conditions: a sense of self-efficacy and intentional control on part of the acting individuals. To achieve these conditions in collective action, especially on the large scale, a shift in the structure of intentionality as well as a shift in bodily awareness are required. In sections two and three it was argued that this shift can be brought about by the mechanisms of imagination and plural self-awareness, which allow the collectivization of intentional states and intentions-in-action. For observing these mechanisms in their actual manifestations and for identifying the conditions under which they become effective, social movements constitute valuable objects of investigation due to their size and the high intensity of contributory action among their members.

Examples of far reaching and historically consequential movement mobilization abound. They include the student movement of the late 1960s, the civil rights movement, the Arab Spring, or the peaceful revolution in the GDR, which took place at different times and in different contexts, but share one crucial feature: a huge number of people overcame the collective action dilemma to act in pursuance of a common purpose. Although the contribution of each of the involved individuals was negligible, many movement activists behaved *as if* the achievement of that purpose depended on their individual efforts. In a certain way, they acted as if the movement constituted one unified collective body. One such case with far reaching political repercussions

was the environmental movement of the 1970s, which spread across the entire Western world, although with varying strengths and characteristics in each country (Radkau 2011). In Germany, it emerged in the early 1970s and developed into different currents, whose mobilization cycles stretched over roughly 20 years. The most influential current was the anti-nuclear movement, which reached its peak between the years 1975 and 1977. This movement provides an impressive example of how an imaginative collective subject takes shape and how it turns into an acting body through the mechanism of plural self-awareness.

The collective imaginary that brought about the environmental and the anti-nuclear movements was a mixture of leftist and ecological ideas that included established thought traditions as well as innovative elements. At its core was the notion of an existential risk emanating from technological growth and complexity, which dates back to at least the early 20th century, when the psychologist Ludwig Klages denounced modern technology as dehumanizing and as endangering life on earth. Some authors locate the origin of this *Leitmotiv* even earlier, in the romantic era and in the biblical motif of human hubris, which led to the expulsion from paradise (Schurig 1994; Siefert 1984). Thus, the idea that technology and the complexity of the modern world entail incalculable and potentially fatal risks was established long before the nuclear movement cropped up. In the course of the 1960s, however, it gained renewed salience in the wake of publications like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and a series of other alarmist book titles.

By the early 1970s, a comprehensive imaginary of ecological risks was in place, focusing on chemical substances, pollution, the exhaustion of natural resources, and environmental degradation (Hünemörder 2004). Some years later, nuclear energy came into the spotlight of the environmental movement. Building sites of nuclear power plants turned into the epicenters of a growing protest movement against nuclear energy, which became the very epitome of an incommensurable risk. At the end of the decade, this motif was expanded to the arms race and potentiated by the threat of nuclear annihilation (Koopmans and Duyvendak 1995). This imaginary by far exceeded all dimensions of perceptual reality. It was centered around mental representations of an apocalyptic scenario (the "intentional object"), which caused the need ("desire") for immediate and far-reaching action (Kestler 2022).

What actually rendered the anti-nuclear movement collectively actionable, however, was a collective intentional subject. As shown above and noted by Klandermans (1984), movement mobilization hinges on the belief of its members that collective action will be efficacious. This is only the case when the acting individuals share an idea of a collective actor with the capabilities of altering the state of affairs. In the anti-nuclear movement, this imagined community received its contours from the student movement and the New Left. It rested on the imagination of an enlightened avant-garde that would lead

the way into a better future by awakening the public in quite the same way as Marxist and Maoist groups had imagined themselves as guiding the proletarian masses. The essence of this imaginative intentional subject is well captured in the phrase “The whole world is watching” from the US student movement, which gives proof to the self-conception of the protesting students as standing in the spotlight of public attention and at the forefront of social change (Gitlin 1980).

Interestingly, this imagination was rationalized by an apocryphal story originally brought up in 1979 by the botanist Lyall Watson and popularized in 1982 by the author Ken Keyes (Benford 1993). The story is about a kind of contagion effect in the behavior of monkeys that, supposedly, occurs when a specific threshold of participation is reached. As the story goes, a group of monkeys had successively learned to wash the potatoes they consumed. When this behavior had spread to a certain point and one additional monkey – the iconic hundredth monkey – learned the new skill, the learning effect suddenly spread to the whole group and even beyond it to other monkey populations that had no contact to the original group. The rationale drawn from this story by movement activists was that even in very large groups, any single individual can tip the balance and spawn a universal learning effect, in that case the insight about an immediate risk of destruction and a necessary change of course. The story of the hundredth monkey was, therefore, a way to resolve the dilemma of effectiveness in the face of an immense task – saving the world from nuclear disaster – and the objective powerlessness of any individual activist. Yet, there was no scientific foundation to this story. It was rather a myth and an effort to handle the contradictions and insufficiencies of the movement’s collective imaginary.

For an imaginary to be collective not just in its mental content but also factually, it needs to be communicated. It must find its expression in sufficiently stable and integrated narrative structures on the group level. Tollefsen and Gallagher (2017) point to the importance of We-narratives as a “stable framework from which shared agency can unfold,” because they provide coherence and continuity to group action. In the case of the German environmental movement, such a narrative framework was in place, but it remained shallow and lacking in depth and stability, especially with regard to the imagined “We.” As the recourse to the monkey-story and testimonies of frustration and exasperation on part of movement activists show, its motivational force was limited (Kestler 2022, Ch. 2). These deficiencies notwithstanding, the ecological narrative proved strong enough to influence the world view of large parts of the German public and to bring about a series of extensive mobilizations.

Establishing a collective imaginary and a collective intentional subject on the level of the mind, however, is one thing, bringing about intentions-in-action among group members is another. The corresponding mechanism is plural self-awareness, which shifts intentional control to the collective level.

Under what conditions does plural self-awareness emerge and how can the “degree of constancy” in collective action be achieved that Pettit regards as necessary for speaking of collective agency? Observations from episodes of mobilization can provide a tentative answer to these questions.

There is no consensus about the conditions of social movement mobilization, but there are some observational regularities regarding the factors that trigger collective action. One factor frequently mentioned in the literature is a perceived threat to a group, be it economic, cultural, physical, or environmental in kind. For instance, protest movements are often triggered by increases in the prices of basic staples, as the so-called Arab Spring, or in public transportation fares, as in Brazil in 2013 or in Venezuela in 1989 (e.g., López Maya 2003). In other cases, diffuse perceptions of threat became salient through violent events. The student movement in Germany reached its peak after the shooting of the student Benno Ohnesorg in Berlin on June 20, 1967, by a police officer. In Colombia, a civil war erupted after the murder of the popular politician Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948 and the uprising of the Arab Spring was sparked by the self-immolation of a street vendor in Tunisia in 2010.

Another set of conditions facilitating collective action is spatial concentration and proximity, especially among highly homogeneous populations like industrial workers or students on university campuses (Zhang and Zhao 2019). It is not by chance that social movement mobilization often originated among workers or students (e.g., Bakuniak and Nowak 1987). The spatial aspect of collective action includes symbolically charged places like the building sites of nuclear power plants in the case of the German anti-nuclear movement or central squares in national capitals like Tiananmen Square in Beijing, Zócalo Square in Mexico City, or Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, which frequently served as focal points of public gatherings and protesting crowds.

The common denominator of these seemingly diverse conditions is simultaneity, which Benedict Anderson describes as constitutive of imagined communities. He refers to the people of a nation, whose members usually never meet or personally know each other, but nonetheless perceive themselves as moving together “simultaneously through homogeneous, empty time.” He conceives of simultaneity as “temporal coincidence, measured by clock and calendar” (Anderson 1983, 24-6), resting on a shared conception and awareness of time and emerging from communication processes. Anderson points to the importance of newspapers for creating a sense of belonging and connectedness: “The date at the top of the newspaper, the single most important emblem on it, provides the essential connection – the steady onward clocking of homogeneous, empty time” (Anderson 1983, 33). Simultaneity can also emerge accidentally from a drastic event, a perceived threat, or spatial concentration that bring about a state of mutual awareness and a shared focus of

attention and concern. The commonality of the various triggers of mass mobilizations, therefore, seems to lie in the creation of simultaneity.

The effect of simultaneity is most clearly observable in musical performances. Anderson describes the particular experience of collectivity emerging from music:

Take national anthems, for example, sung on national holidays. No matter how banal the words and mediocre the tunes, there is in this singing an experience of simultaneity. At precisely such moments, people wholly unknown to each other utter the same verses to the same melody. The image: unisonance. Singing the Marseillaise, Waltzing Matilda, and Indonesia Raya provide occasions for unisonality, for the echoed physical realization of the imagined community. (Anderson 1983, 145)

As it seems, music creates that “pre-reflexive, unthematic sense of belonging” characteristic of a state of plural self-awareness. As Eyerman and Jamison (1998) note, “music can embody the sense of community, a type of experience and identity pointing beyond the walls of the self, which has become the central locus of modern experience and commitment. Such community may well be ‘imagined,’ but since it affects identity, it is no less real for that” (173). This is possibly the reason why music is ubiquitous in social movements, particularly in their early, formative stages.

Based on these accounts and observations, we may conclude that a collective actor can be turned into an actual collective body by the condition of synchronization. An external stimulus, e.g., music, creates a state of shared attention, in which collective intentions-in-action can emerge. For such an effect to occur, an imaginatively pre-constituted collective intentional subject needs to be in place. A group has to exist as mental representation before shared intentions-in-action can be triggered by a synchronizing stimulus. Think of an orchestra, which constitutes a collective actor based on shared meanings, experiences, and mutual expectations, with each member conceiving of herself as a part of the group and committed to the common goal of performing, say, a sinfonia. Under such conditions, a synchronizing sign by the conductor suffices to turn the orchestra into a uniformly acting body. The same effect is produced in a soccer team, which becomes an acting body as soon as the referee blows her whistle and the ball starts moving. An analogous effect can be assumed to be operative in large groups like a national electorate, which is instantiated as democratic sovereign and moved to collective action by the synchronizing impulse of an electoral campaign and the date of the election.

For social movements, maintaining a state of plural self-awareness through synchronicity is a major challenge. As facilitating conditions are usually transitory, triggering events need to be created deliberately, for example by provoking clashes with the police. In the case of the German anti-nuclear movement – as in most other movements – simultaneity of perception and

attention remained precarious and largely dependent on accidental circumstances. One such fortuitous circumstance occurred at a nuclear building site near the town of Brokdorf, in Northern Germany, where in October 1976 several thousands of activists gathered to protest against the start of construction activities. Their common focus of attention was the area around the planned power station and the fenced building site. Unexpectedly, the protesters managed to get past the barriers and to occupy the building site for a short time. This success produced exceptional euphoria among the activists, who immediately after the event started to organize local initiatives, from which a few years later a state-level branch of the Green party emerged. This first successful occupation at Brokdorf was perceived and remembered as a moment of awakening and breakthrough when the movement turned into a manifest collective actor (Appen, Storim, and Zabel 2006; Pettenkofer 2014).

Manifest collective action resulting from a shift in intentional control provides the conditions of satisfaction needed for an imagined collective actor to become “real” (i.e., to match the mental representation of a collective intentional subject). In such moments when “minds and bodies are liberated,” it can indeed be said that imagination takes power, as French students aptly proclaimed in May 1968. Moreover, the Brokdorf episode shows how such “moments of madness” are integrated into a group’s collective imaginary and how they help structuring a We-narrative through a foundational myth by constituting a point of departure for a collective journey through “homogeneous, empty time.” In that way, triggering events can provide the foundation of a narration and a shared conception of time, which affords the degree of constancy and coherence in collective action necessary for speaking of collective agency (cf. Sewell 1996).

5. Summary and Conclusion

The foregoing considerations started from the observation that established approaches to collective action in the fields of organizational theory, sociological institutionalism, and institutional economics leave a gap between collective logics of action, on the one hand, and individual structures of motivation, on the other. This gap becomes evident in the case of large groups, where the effective influence of individual members on the outcome of collective action is negligible. Nonetheless, there are large groups with individual members not just doing “their part” but sometimes assuming disproportionate personal costs for the sake of a common goal.

To approach this puzzle, two mechanisms were proposed to explain the foundations of individual motivation to act in collective contexts: imagination and plural self-awareness. It was argued that in the way of imagination the structure of intentionality can be shifted to the collective level and bring

about a collective intentional subject that affords a sense of self-efficacy to individuals in collective action. Plural self-awareness was described as a mechanism detaching intentional control from the physical body and, thereby, allowing intentions-in-action to take on a collective structure. Recurring to the example of the German environmental movement, it was shown that collective action during episodes of mobilization emerged from a well established imaginary and from external conditions that produced a state of plural self-awareness among movement activists. For specifying these conditions, Anderson's notion of simultaneity offered helpful insights. It points to the importance of shared perception and attention among group members, produced by external conditions such as spatial concentration, communication, or drastic events for collective action orientations to arise.

Therefore, both, a collective imaginary as well as a synchronizing external stimulus are required for collective actorhood to emerge and to establish itself. Without synchronicity, an imagined collective subject remains in a state of latency like tango dancers without music, a soccer team without a ball or an orchestra without a director. Equally, without a pre-constituted collective imaginary, an external stimulus will remain without effect. Collective action results from the combination of a shared imaginary with a state of plural self-awareness stemming from synchronizing conditions. Once these conditions become structurally embedded, as it happened with the German environmental movement and the foundation of the Green party, we can speak of collective agency. This process of establishing stable collective actorhood is usually referred to as institutionalization (e.g., Brand 1999). Institutions reproduce collective imaginaries through We-narratives and they create simultaneity of perception and attention through communication and periodic events like elections or national holidays. When institutions fail to sustain these mechanisms, they lose their capacity to create volition in their members and to orientate individual structures of motivation towards collective goals.

Two general lessons regarding the problem of collective agency can be drawn from these theoretical considerations and empirical observations. First, the collective action dilemma can be overcome. Individual structures of motivation can be shifted to the collective level and orientated towards the achievement of a common goal. Second, the conditions that bring about such a shift on the macro level among a number of people large enough to affect institutional development are quite exceptional and difficult to maintain. Large scale collective agency rests on a stable, integrated, and institutionally ingrained collective imaginary as well as a continuous state of plural self-awareness created by synchronizing structures of communication and organization. Without such structures, collective actors like parties, religious communities, or nation states are hardly sustainable.

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