

## CHAPTER 5

# Social Movement Communication as Democratic Innovation: The Alta Conflict 1970–1982

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**Abstract:** How can lobbying and influence be useful not only for those who already are powerful, but also for the empowerment of the disempowered? Thus, how may we democratise control over the means of rhetorical power? An answer may be found in rare cases of social movement communication impacting constitutional reform, such as the Alta dam conflict, 1970–1982, from an area where the Norwegian state overlaps with the Sápmi homeland. Social movement communication as democratic innovation is a research topic scattered between social movement studies (SMS) and strategic communication research (SCR). This chapter integrates both perspectives, firstly, (a) by identifying one shared approach, “empirically grounded critical theory”; and secondly, (b) by applying the empirical method typical to that approach, namely “comparative historical analysis”; and thirdly (c) by suggesting some empirically grounded amendments to existing theoretical concepts on social movement communication as democratic innovation.

**Keywords:** strategic communication, social movement, critical theory, Alta dam conflict, participatory-deliberative democracy

## Introduction

How can strategic communication deepen democracy by serving less resourceful groups in their efforts to empower themselves? Combining strategic communication research (SCR) with social movement studies (SMS), this chapter investigates *social movement communication as democratic innovation*. That is, lobbying and influence as tools not only for those who are already powerful, but also for the empowerment of the disempowered. Thus, the chapter contributes to research on democratisation of the means of rhetorical power.

By analysing a historical case, this chapter suggests concepts and methods for research on social movement communication as democratic innovation. The Alta Conflict started out as a local conflict about hydro-power development, but evolved into a conflict over competing models of democracy. It took place from 1970 until 1982, within the partly overlapping territories of the Norwegian state and the Sápmi homeland. A pro-dam movement had obtained a ruling position in the Norwegian state, but met with resistance, and an anti-dam movement emerged all over the Sápmi homeland, and spread beyond this area to become a wider movement (for a recent and vivid narrative over these events, see: Eriksen, 2023). Eventually, the dam was built. However, the conflicts that arose led to a crisis for the corporative and parliamentary democratic order, opening up political opportunities for lobbying, actionism, and later, formal constitutional changes aimed at protecting Indigenous rights and environmental rights.

Section 2 presents theoretical gains from SCR (e.g., Falkheimer & Heide, 2023) and SMS (e.g., della Porta & Diani, 2007). Our chapter integrates both SCR and SMS, operating within one of their shared approaches: empirically grounded Critical Theory, which has developed from Jürgen Habermas' normative theorising (e.g., della Porta, 2020; Falkheimer & Heide, 2021). Using Critical Theory, we contribute to the further development of analytical concepts *on social movement communication and democratic innovation*, introduced in section 3, by applying a *comparative historical analysis*, described in section 4.

Then, in sections 5–6, we examine the selected empirical case. We discuss the historiography of the Alta Conflict, considering newly accessible primary sources (section 4), and analyse questions that were ignored in earlier research on the case (section 5) due to the specialisation between

SCR (Ihlen, 2004) and SMS (Jensen, 2015). Specifically, we analyse the Alta Conflict as democratic innovation through social movement communication. The Alta Conflict serves as a test case for the role of communication in democratic innovation because it is an example of a social movement that created constitutional change (Johnsen, 2021, p. 23; Minde, 2003), something that is rare (Bailey & Mattei, 2013; della Porta, 2020). As a rare historical example of “new social movements” having an impact on a “corporatist democratic system” (Dryzek et al., 2003, pp. 26–27), it is hence a “deviant case” in the methodological sense (see Rueschemeyer, 2003, pp. 310–311). Thus, the study is not only an *application* of earlier concepts on social movement communication as democratic innovation; the case study suggests that the general explanatory concepts should be *amended* to fit an empirical reality of a specific type, where constitutional change is an important aspect.

Finally, section 6 provides implications for science and policy. We argue that, in this case, strategic communication *did* contribute to furthering democratisation by empowering the disempowered, and that – in some cases – social movements may use rhetorical creativity to *generate resources* and convert these resources into rhetorical impact.

Regarding the *ideographic* dimension, we discuss the implications of our analysis for debates regarding lobbyism and actionism, related to the Norwegian state-commissioned Power and Democracy Research (1998–2003) as well as the ongoing Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2018–2023), and we suggest directions for further research.

*Nomothetically*, these findings *demonstrate* that an integration of SCR with SMS, together with methodological sensitivity to historical processes, can help to uncover *complex interactions* between dominant and oppositional political forces. The case *tests* certain concepts from Critical Theory, indicating that – at least in some cases – it may be empirically misleading with *a priori* reification of “juridification” and “hegemony”, as these two concepts have been conceptualised, by Habermas (1981b) and Laclau and Mouffe (2001), respectively. We thus challenge some of the conceptual dichotomies that are foundational to the Critical Theory approach, an approach which is shared among some researchers of SCR as well as SMS – such as Habermas’ (1981a, 1981b) dichotomy between communicative and instrumental rationalities, or Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) assumed “agonism” between institutionalised deliberation and radical participation. Such dichotomies do not always fit the empirical

findings (e.g., della Porta, 2013), but this discrepancy has not yet been researched.<sup>1</sup>

## Background and puzzle

The toolbox of political action includes lobbying and activism. Do such tools undermine democracy by serving already resourceful groups at the cost of the common good? Or do such tools deepen democracy by opening for a wider range of voices? By acknowledging that most tools of political action may be used for good or evil, this chapter contributes empirically based theory that builds on how strategic communication may empower social movements that aim to deepen democracy, integrating both social movement studies (SMS) and strategic communication research (SCR). In both fields, there are ongoing efforts to formulate concepts regarding the phenomenon “social movement communication as democratic innovation” (e.g., Adi, 2019; della Porta, 2020, p. viii; Ihlen, 2004; Jensen, 2015; Mattoni, 2012, Milan, 2013; Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2019).

Strategic communication research (SCR) deals with *influence* or persuasion. It is something of a paradox when some scholars in the field call for increased awareness of *power* (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018, p. 138) and *power inequalities* (Ihlen, 2004; Sommerfeldt, 2012). A founding article defined “strategic communication” as “the purposeful use of communication by an *organisation* to fulfil its mission” (our emphasis, Hallahan et al., 2007 cited in Falkheimer & Heide, 2023, p. 5). Though “organisation” in this definition *might* be a social movement (Hallahan et al., 2007, pp. 3–4; Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 334), *most* researchers in the field nevertheless deal with corporate communication, seeing activists and critical publics as adversaries (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018, pp. 34–5; Sommerfeldt, 2012). This disregard of the strategic communication of non-institutionalised actors, including oppositional social movements, indicates a blind spot in SCR research. Though SCR has a growing body of literature regarding political PR (Stromback & Kiousis, 2019), this research mainly focuses on how *institutionalised* parties or state- and business actors apply marketing strategies. Only a few studies take the opposite standpoint, inquiring into “activist PR” (Adi, 2019; Ihlen, 2004; Sommerfeldt, 2012), and only occasionally is the issue of *power differences* (Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2019) treated as something

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more *material* than merely a moral(istic) choice (as in Dan et al., 2019). This puzzling shortcoming in SCR may be because this research is still in its infancy, as “strategic communication has emerged as a professional and academic concept during the last two decades” (Falkheimer & Heide, 2023, p. 84).

Social movement studies (SMS), by contrast, is a specialised field of political sociology, established since the 1980s, in the aftermath of the “new social movements” (Della Porta & Diani 2007, p. 1). “Social movements” may be defined as “(a) mostly informal networks of interaction, based on (b) shared beliefs and solidarity, mobilised around (c) contentious themes through (d) the frequent use of various forms of protest” (della Porta & Mattoni, 2016). Hence, social movements are swarm-like configurations of individuals and “social movement organisations” (SMOs), which range from the ephemeral and improvised, to the permanent and formalised (Della Porta & Diani, 2007, p. 140). If SCR seeks sensitising concepts regarding *power* (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018, p. 138) and *power inequalities* (Adi, 2019; Ihlen, 2004; Sommerfeldt, 2012), then it may look to SMS research, first and foremost regarding media and communication as *empowerment* (Bazzichelli, 2013; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Karpf, 2017; Mattoni, 2012; Milan, 2013; Zamponi, 2018),<sup>2</sup> but also regarding the role of social movements in *democratisation* (della Porta, 2013, 2020; Rossi & della Porta, 2019; Talpin, 2015).

On the basis of these contested themes in current research: What research question is it pertinent to inquire into? In a rare example of integrating both SCR and SMS research, Bazzichelli (2013) gained fresh insight on *innovations* in the IT-sector as being co-determined by both social movement communication and corporate communication. This approach to innovation may be transferred to research on democratisation. During recent decades, many modern democracies have seen decreased participation in elections and parties (della Porta, 2020, p. viii) – while demands from social movements have led states to adopt *democratic innovations*, defined as “institutional arrangements allowing for participation, deliberation, and sometimes decisions of lay citizens and non-professionalised political actors beyond the ballot” (Smith, 2009, cited in Talpin, 2015). Integrating SCR and SMS in studies of democratic innovation may enable

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2 See also the Routledge book series “Media and Communication Activism: The Empowerment Practices of Social Movements” (e.g., Belotti, 2022; Pedro-Caranana et al., 2022; Rone, 2022).

us to unpack the various nuances of the *interactions*, between institutionalised and emerging actors. In particular, interactions that are related to both institutionalised and emergent actors' use of communication as a means for conveying and shaping their definitions of their own movements.

*Our chapter* asks the following question, at a general level: How can strategic communication deepen democracy by serving less resourceful groups in their efforts to empower themselves? Despite evidence, such as the Alta Conflict, this issue still seems to be weakly conceptualised. The research may be brought one step forward by integrating SCR and SMS. Thus, SCR may provide better tools to discover empowerment and democratisation, while SMS may more easily unpack and demystify institutionalised and already empowered actors. We integrate SCR and SMS in a historical comparative analysis. Previously, the case has been analysed from the angles of SCR (Ihlen, 2004) and SMS (Jensen, 2015) respectively. By integrating the two perspectives, we state novel research questions. From the viewpoint of SCR (Ihlen, 2004), the case was used to demonstrate how *differences in resourcefulness* could *determine rhetoric capacity*, but with little regard for how such dynamics change relative power inequalities. From the perspective of SMS (Jensen, 2015), the case demonstrates the dynamic self-empowerment of two competing political SMO-blocks, but without specific analysis of rhetorical practices. Thus, we ask the question that was ignored by this specialisation: *How do SMOs use rhetorical creativity to generate resources, and change relative power inequalities?*

How should we conduct research on such questions? Some researchers, within SMS and SCR alike, seek to contribute to empowerment and democratisation by adopting empirically grounded Critical Theory as their research approach (e.g., della Porta, 2020; Falkheimer & Heide, 2021). In the narrow sense, Critical Theory (with capital letters to denote a particular intellectual tradition) is the research tradition from the Frankfurt School. According to Habermas (1965), *critical research* is to pursue research questions of relevance to *human emancipation*, combining explanatory science with interpretative humanities. Below we elaborate on our method of critical research by way of abductive reasoning and the critical inquiry this method entails.

Some see a sustained tension within Critical Theory between empirical inquiry and normative philosophy (Bohman, 2021). Within SMS, this tension has been operationalised as a research design where Habermas' normative concepts have informed comparative research, leading in turn

to empirically based refinements of the normative concepts (della Porta, 2013, 2020). This corresponds well with what has been suggested as a way forward for SCR, taking inspiration from Critical Theory (Falkheimer & Heide, 2023, p. 212), combining the scientific “transmission-approach” with the humanistic “sense-making-approach” (Falkheimer & Heide, 2023, pp. 37–40), and applying Habermas’ normative distinction between *communicative* and *strategic* action to evaluate the degree to which the ideals of “co-creation” and “stakeholder dialogue” is actualised in empirical reality (Falkheimer & Heide, 2023, pp. 19, 60–62). We do not aim to “solve” these debates in this chapter, but rather see this as a fruitful starting point for our inquiry.

*Our chapter* operates within this Critical Theory approach, with its productive tension between empirical inquiry and normative theorising. We will now turn to a review of the implications regarding choice of analytical concepts (section 3) and research methods (section 4).

## Concepts

Our chapter contributes to the ongoing development of *analytical concepts* about social movement communication as democratic innovation. These concepts were originally coined by political philosophers within Critical Theory that hold different views on communication (e.g., Habermas, 1981a, 1981b; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001), and further developed empirically within SCR and SMS (e.g., della Porta, 2013, 2020; Falkheimer & Heide, 2023). We summarise the conceptual development so far, identify some unresolved issues, and use these for a theoretical operationalisation of our research questions.

Strategic communication is radically challenged by Habermas’ conceptual bifurcation of *strategy* and *communication* as a dichotomous relation. “Strategic action is goal oriented, persuasive, and instrumental, while communicative action is oriented towards understanding and consensus” (Falkheimer & Heide, 2023, p. 61). The *ideal* communicative action is a dialogue where all participants are truly free to participate on truly equal terms. Democratisation theory argues that pure communicative action, if actualised, would be ideal *deliberative-democratic practice*, leading to consensus on the common good for all participants (della Porta, 2013; Eriksen, 1995). Compared to classical *technè rhétorikè* (Barthes, 1994), Habermas’ pure “communicative action” likens an idealist understanding of rhetoric,

as a deliberative clarification of norms and truth, whereas pure “strategic action” includes the sceptic’s understanding of rhetoric, as a manipulation of norms and truth. For Habermas, the open dialogue is to be desired, because it opens the right of individuals to argumentation and their inter-subjective recognition of each other in a shared “lifeworld”.

Yet the so-called “colonialisation” of the lifeworld by “systems” (e.g., state administration and market capitalism) is constantly hindering such a free exchange of views because its instrumental logic penetrates the lifeworld (Habermas, 1981b). Habermas’ dichotomy is a sensitising concept for ethical suspicion towards all mixing of strategy with communication (see Falkheimer & Heide, 2023, p. 61), such as PR, advertisement, and political campaigns. Social movement communication is not immune to Habermas’ critical suspicion. When some movements are seen as reactionary, authoritarian, or violent, they may be explained in terms of strategic action taking the upper hand.

When it comes to *democratisation movements*, Critical Theory combines ethical suspicion with pragmatic concerns – or strategic action. Laclau and Mouffe (2001) argue that political order always remains unfinished and imperfect, with unresolved conflicts and various coalitions struggling for domination, or “hegemony”. Furthermore, they claim that a “non-exclusive public sphere of rational argument is a conceptual impossibility” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. xvii; see also: della Porta, 2013), and thus they are even more suspicious than Habermas himself of whether communicative reasoning is even possible. They propose informal deliberative-democratic practices, understood as “counter-hegemony” in competitive (“agonistic”) relation to the dominant hegemony. Laclau and Mouffe (2001, p. xviii) call this “radical democracy” and argue in opposition to Habermas. However, Habermas (1962, § 14-15) analysed the failed revolution in 1848 as a failed attempt by “radical democrats” at instituting a more inclusive, “plebeian” public sphere,<sup>3</sup> and Habermas (1981a, 1982b, cited in della Porta 2013) took interest in both formal and informal forms of deliberation. The use of language can both be liberating and “colonising”, which Habermas (1981b) illustrates with the paradox of the “*juridification*” of rights, such as workers’ rights, on the one hand providing, potentially, the fulfilment of certain goals of social movements, and on the other hand, stalling further

3 In a recent response to Mouffe (1999), the “agonistic” form of “radical democracy” is included in Habermas’ theory of deliberative democracy. (See the German original: Habermas, 2023a, pp. 19, 51, 47–48, 63–4; as well as the Norwegian translation: Habermas, 2023b, pp. 22–23, 51–3, 60, 64–6.)

political struggle, because of the institutionalisation of rights (Spång, 2018). In that context, Habermas has *mostly* theorised on the possibility of establishing deliberative-democratic institutions *within the limits* of formalised *juridification*, whereas Laclau/Mouffe strive to open informal deliberative-democratic zones *within the limits* of oppositional *counter-hegemony*. These two models have been labelled “*liberal-deliberative democracy*” for the institutionalised form, and “*participatory-deliberative democracy*” for the oppositional form (della Porta, 2013). It seems that both Habermas and Laclau/Mouffe *contribute strategically* to radical *deliberative democracy* – a paradoxical unity of pure strategic action and pure communicative action. It seems that they try to resolve that paradox as a dialectical opposition within their analytical concepts of (counter-)hegemony and juridification. Other democracy theorists suggest that Habermas’ *dichotomy* would be better *redefined as scale*, including a range of mixed forms (Rommetvedt, 1995, pp. 109–119).

Empirical research on democratisation movements applies comparative historical analysis to inquiry into the *empirical manifestations* of deliberative democracy as coined by Critical Theory, especially its informal forms (della Porta, 2013). However, this research is in dialogue with other empirical research fronts, which may challenge the analytical concepts used by Critical Theory. By searching for mechanisms of democratic innovation, della Porta (2020) takes part in the research front on the outcomes of social movements (Bailey & Mattei, 2013; Bosi & Uba, 2021). Della Porta (2020) approaches such mechanisms mostly as social movement communication, theorised as the “framing processes” of SMOs (Snow, 2007). This includes not only framing as a dimension of *influencing*, or the “action repertoires” expressed by the SMOs (Taylor & van Dyke, 2007), but also framing as a dimension of *organising*, theorised as “resource mobilisation” within SMOs (Edwards & McCarthy, 2007) – two phenomena that SCR knows as the “external and internal communication” of organisations (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018, pp. 17–18). Such network analysis starts at the meso-level, which diverges from the abstract macro models such as (counter-) hegemony and juridification. The research so far, to our knowledge, has not discussed this *discrepancy* between normative concepts and empirical description. The *dichotomous models* of the micro-macro relation, offered by Critical Theory (Habermas, 1981a; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001) may be better fitted to discover systemic inertia than the democratic potential of communicative action in the life-world. However,

so-called “practice theories”, with their *dualist models* of the micro-macro relation, may be fit to discover opportunities for transformative action, such as in the generative and dialectical tensions between structure and action.<sup>4</sup> We explore how both perspectives may be useful with respect to understanding democratic innovation. With this assumption, we may operationalise the research question: “How do SMOs use rhetorical creativity to generate resources, and change relative power inequalities?” Theoretically operationalised, the question becomes: “If we trace such actions in terms of networks, will the relation between micro and macro be better explained using the dichotomous or the dualist model of micro-macro relationships?”

We have now operationalised our research question regarding some of the unresolved issues in the empirical application of Critical Theory on social movement communication as democratic innovation.

## Methods

Our chapter adapts a historical-sociological method typical to empirically grounded Critical Theory. *Historicising*, or taking a historical approach, aims at discovering which human practices might have brought about what we know as society, and thus, which human actions might change it. We use this method to avoid *reification*, i.e., misinterpreting contingent human creations as unavoidable natural conditions (Lukács, 1923).

Habermas (1962), following in footsteps of Marx (1852), traced the rise and fall of the “bourgeois public sphere” through Western European history. Similarly, recent SCR on PR and democracy suggests testing the empirical grounds for Habermas’ more recent contributions to normative philosophy, by turning to historical institutionalist studies of democratisation (Engelstad, 2015). This would fit with a perceived need within SCR for more “observational” studies, that is, registering what people do rather than what they say that they do (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 345). SMS, similarly, applies comparative historical analysis to identify mechanisms

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4 Some examples of practice theories being applied to research social movement communication: Bourdieu (1977) is applied by Ihlen (2004) and Mattoni (2020); Giddens (1984) is applied by Sommerfeldt (2012) and Mattoni (2020); Gramsci (2021) is applied by Marchi (2021); Latour (2007) and Deleuze and Guattari (1980/2006) are applied by Jensen (2015); while Negri (2000) is applied by Cini et al. (2017).

of democratisation at work across different particular cases (della Porta, 2020).

How can one single case yield theoretical gain? (Rueschemeyer, 2003). In other words, how may we generalise sociologically (nomothetical research) after documenting a unique historical process (ideographic research)? Historical narratives are written by arranging facts according to implicit explanatory models (Carr, 1961). These explanatory models may be made explicit in the form of diachronic comparisons within chains of causes and effects, so called *analytical narratives* (Knutsen, 2002). Such within-case (diachronic) comparison may or may not be combined with cross-case (synchronic) comparison. In any case, it is the “dialogue between theory and evidence that constitutes the comparative advantage of comparative historical analysis” (Rueschemeyer, 2003, p. 312). For Peirce (1986), it is incremental hypothesis development, so-called “abduction”: “Hypothesis is where we find some very curious circumstance, which would be explained by the supposition that it was a case of a certain general rule, and thereupon adopt that supposition” (Peirce, 1986, p. 326, cited in Jensen, 2015, p. 110). Abduction involves an “inductive” description of a particular case (“some very curious circumstance” in Peirce’s words), as well as a “deductive” argument to explain it (“would be explained by the supposition”), leading to hypothesis-development (“thereupon adopt that supposition”) (Jensen, 2015, p. 110). What Peirce calls a “curious circumstance” may at times qualify as a “least likely case”, or alternatively, a finding that disconfirms some “deterministic” hypothesis. In such cases we may talk about hypothesis testing, not only hypothesis development, even with single-case studies (Rueschemeyer, 2003, pp. 310–311).

*Our chapter* contributes with abductive conceptual development. It is a comparative historical analysis based on diachronic comparison within a single case. It will soon be clear that this is a “least likely case”, and thus, the abduction is close to hypothesis testing. The reader will now be introduced to the case first through a historical narrative (section 5), and then through a sociological analysis (section 6). We will discuss the previous historiography of the case in the light of newly disclosed primary sources, and we will revisit the sociological analyses to refine some analytical concepts. Thus, the next chapter continues the methodological discussion in a more concrete sense related to the documentation, historiography, and analysis of the case.

## A historical narrative of the case

The Alta Dam Conflict (1970–1982) was a cycle of eventful protests within two partly overlapping historical-geographical entities, the Norwegian nation-state and the Sápmi Indigenous homeland. In this section, we will first present the historical significance of the event, and frame it as a “least likely case”. Thereafter, we will narrate a short history of the case. Finally, this section will discuss the historical research on the case, and review some newly available primary sources.

### The historical significance of the Alta Conflict

Historians see the Alta Conflict as significant because of its contribution to Indigenous rights and environmental rights (Dalland, 1997, pp. 41–42), not only regarding the national histories of Sápmi and Norway (Minde, 2003), but also in the context of comparative history. In comparative research on *environmental rights*, Dryzek et al. (2003, pp. 26–27) analyse the Alta Conflict as a *rare example* of “new social movements” gaining popular support within a “corporatist political system”. Similarly, in comparative research on *Indigenous rights*, Johnsen (2021, p. 23) argues that it is clear that for the Sámi people, a “genesis phase [...] occurred in the 1970s as the Sámi movement gained momentum and eventually culminated in the Alta Conflict”. However, Indigenous rights and environmental rights remain publicly controversial. Whether the changes should be seen as democratisation or not is an issue for an ongoing Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as well as the public debate surrounding it (Johnsen, 2021, p. 23).<sup>5</sup> This has implications for our research. We may frame the Alta Conflict as what we call a “least likely” case in the methodological sense (see section 4), not only because social movements rarely gain constituent power (Bailey & Mattei, 2013; della Porta, 2013), but also because it took place within a corporative and discriminatory political tradition.

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5 “The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Norway” was appointed by the Norwegian parliament in June 2018. Its mandate was to (1) conduct a *historical* mapping of the Norwegian authorities’ assimilation policy towards the Sami, Kven/Finnish and Forest-Finnish minorities, (2) examining *contemporary* repercussions of the assimilation policies, and finally, (3) propose *future* initiatives for further reconciliation. The final report was submitted to the Norwegian parliament on 1 June 2023: <https://www.stortinget.no/globalassets/pdf/sannhets--og-forsoningskommisjonen/rapport-til-stortinget-fra-sannhets--og-forsoningskommisjonen.pdf> (last accessed 06.11.2013).

## A brief history of the Alta Conflict

Public contention over the dam started in 1970, when planning documents from the Ministry of Industry reached the local population. Protests lasted until 1982, with a pro-dam ruling by the Supreme Court, one failed sabotage action, and the main anti-dam SMO shutting down. Subaltern classes along Alta River were split on the matter. The same was the case with experts within the judicial and executive state powers. The parliament took a pro-dam stance twice: in 1978, the reason was an expected energy crisis, then, in 1980, the rationale was never to give in to actionists and lobbyists. Anti-dam protestors contested the legality of these decisions through the court system. The main anti-dam SMO, *Folkeaksjonen* or “The People’s Action” adapted unconventional means, lobbying and actionism, not only to influence public opinion, but also to block construction work, in anticipation of a court ruling. A less known, local pro-dam SMO called themselves *Borgervernet*, “The Militia”. More effectively, an anti-dam SMO, *Samisk aksjonsgruppe*, “Sámi Action Group” took action in the capital city Oslo, holding hunger strikes for Indigenous rights in 1979 and 1981. Both times, Labour party governments responded with a temporary delay of construction work. In the autumn of 1981, the Conservative Party formed a government, making conditions no longer favourable for hunger strikes. The Conservative Party was strictly pro-dam, while the centrist and radical left parties were anti-dam. The Labour party was split, but restored its pro-dam line in 1980. Also in 1980, the Ministry of Defence refused to use military capabilities for protest policing. This move contributed to avoiding a violent escalation, together with “The People’s Action” shutting down after the Supreme Court decision. The dam was built, but the Supreme Court’s pro-dam reasoning remains controversial in the legal profession, and the hunger strike in 1979 set in train a formal policy process, which would eventually lead to constitutional reform in 1989.

## Accumulated research regarding the Alta Conflict

If we leave activist literature and historical novels out of our account (e.g., Mikkelsen, 1971 1980), four systematic and in-depth historical accounts stand out. Dalland (1994) documented a detailed timeline without much narration or analysis. Ihlen (2004), re-visited the case in his doctoral thesis within SCR, analysing the struggle for agenda-setting between the more institutionalised actors involved. Hjorthol (2006) added a detailed

historical account, with particularly good access to sources regarding internal struggles within the labour movement. Jensen (2015) re-visited the case again in a doctoral thesis within SMS, taking a historical-anthropological view on the social basis of the competing pro- and anti-dam movements.

Additionally, there is an ongoing documentation process that has brought forth primary sources. Fresh primary sources have been published in the form of oral history interviews (Kuhn 2020) and autobiographies (Møller, 2015; Nilsen, 2019; Somby, 2016, 2022), whereas new documentation projects demonstrate better the role of local media (Larsen, 2019) and artistic practices (Garcia-Antón, 2019; Guttorm et al., 2020). These new sources provide richer information about the local historical anthropology (Larsen, 2019; Moller, 2015; Nilsen, 2019), as well as the least institutionalised parts of the Indigenous rights movement (Garcia-Anton, 2019; Guttorm et al., 2020; Kuhn, 2020; Somby, 2016, 2022). Other issues remain under-documented, such as a local pro-dam militia, and the anti-dam stance of local courts.

This chapter is mainly based on the latest iteration of the historical research (Jensen, 2015), partly because that study was authored by one of the co-authors of the present chapter. For sources, Jensen (2015) builds on three previous studies. Past ethnographic accounts<sup>6</sup> were added to unpack the subaltern social basis of the two competing coalitions. Furthermore, ethnographic primary sources from contemporary memory work has been included.<sup>7</sup> For most historians, the analysis is implicit in the narration (Knutsen, 2002, pp. 218–219). We will now move to a more *explicit* analytical narrative.

## A sociological analysis of the case

After discussing the history of the case, we proceed to analyse it sociologically. Addressing research questions that were left out by previous studies of the case, we test the applicability of certain analytical concepts.

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- 6 The past ethnographic accounts used by Jensen (2015, p. 194) were the following: *Firstly*, regarding the downstream Alta watershed, the source was Horgen & Norddølum (1978), which was published as a contribution to a Norwegian official Report, similar to a British “Green paper” (NOU 1978:18A, pp. 181–188). *Secondly*, the source on reindeer nomadism between upstream and downstream areas was Bjørklund & Brantenborg (1981), published as an expert witness report for the Norwegian reindeer owner association (NRF) for the Supreme Court case in 1982. *Thirdly*, the Supreme Court decision itself (Norwegian Supreme Court, 1982) was utilised as a primary source for discourse analysis, a method that is not ethnographic in the strictest sense, but which is part of the toolbox for historical anthropology in the *Annales*-tradition.
- 7 During the winter of 2014–2016 the author of Jensen (2015), who is also the main author of this chapter, worked as an archivist at Alta Museum World Heritage Rock Art Center. He worked on digitalization and dissemination of archival material, utilizing participatory-democratic techniques for co-creation together with persons from the organization that had donated the archive: *Folkeaksjonen* (the People’s Action), which was the main anti-dam SMO from the Alta Conflict.

*Firstly*, from the perspective of SCR, analysis of the Alta Conflict has highlighted the relation between rhetoric and resources, limited to fixed positions in the social field (Ihlen, 2004, p. 322), demonstrating that more resourceful actors have higher rhetorical capacity. *Secondly*, from an SMS perspective, the Alta Conflict was analysed in terms of power dynamics, regarding how two agonistic movements scaled up their actions in a struggle for social and political hegemony, however, that research did not analyse rhetoric specifically (Jensen, 2015, ch. 6). By integrating the two approaches, we address a research question that was ignored when the approaches were kept separate (see section 2): *How do SMOs use rhetorical creativity to generate resources and change relative power inequalities?* Examining this question, we not only *apply* certain analytical concepts from Critical Theory (see section 3), but also *test* their suitability in a “least likely” case (see section 4).

We will now address the research question according to the theoretical operationalisation outlined in section 3: If we trace such actions in terms of networks, will the relation between micro and macro be better explained with the dichotomous or the dualist model of micro-macro relationships?

When the conflict started in 1970, the pro-dam coalition had already installed itself within central nodes of power, such as the national interest organisations of capital<sup>8</sup> and labour,<sup>9</sup> the Labour and Conservative Parties, the Government, and the Ministry of Industry. From 1970 until 1979, a wide anti-dam coalition emerged, originating in local protest movements in the villages of Maze and Alta, ending with a constitutional crisis in the capital city of Oslo. Then in 1980, the anti-dam movement failed to win the majority within the Labour Party and, thus, the national parliament, whereas the pro-dam camp failed to mobilise the Ministry of Defence and its military capacities. By 1981, the pro-dam politicians in central positions had lost much of their initial hegemony, with plural legal interpretations in local courts, and competing scientific assessments in the administration. However, pro-dam politicians succeeded in imposing a restored unity of the court system and the state administration. In February 1982, the conflict ended with the final pro-dam decision in the Norwegian Supreme

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8 The Norwegian Employer's Confederation was known as NAF, acronym for “Norsk arbeidsgiverforening”, until it became part of a wider Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise, known today as NHO, acronym for “Næringslivets hovedorganisasjon” in 1989.

9 The Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions, known as LO, acronym for “Landsorganisasjonen”.

Court, and an attempted sabotage action against a bridge by an anti-dam cell.

We may see the entire conflict through the lens of *cybernetic networks*. Tracing organising networks at the sociological meso-level is an approach to researching the mutual influence between micro action and macro structure, within SMS (Diani, 2007, p. 341; Staggenborg, 2002, p. 125) as well as within SCR (Falkheimer & Heide, 2023, p. 9). The research has explained the upscaling of the anti-dam block and the restoration of the pro-dam block with slightly different analytical concepts. *On the one hand*, the restoration of the *pro-dam block* was theorised in rather abstract terms (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/2005, ch. 9), awaiting more detailed empirical data (Jensen, 2015, p. 265). Analysis of pro-dam networking should be cautious not to speculate beyond existing data. *On the other hand*, the upscaling of the *anti-dam block* was explained by transferring analytical concepts from another empirical study, regarding coalition building between dispersed environmental movements in Italy (della Porta & Piazza, 2008). Two locally based movements against large public works in northern and southern Italy managed to act in concert after they developed *frame resonance* about *re-defining* their local struggles as resisting “large useless public works” (della Porta & Piazza, 2008). Similar mechanisms were at play during the Alta Conflict (Jensen, 2015): Local inhabitants who would see their livelihoods negatively affected by damming the river congregated and sought external allies, and they emphasised the common good. The emerging networks may be traced from two villages down- and upstream of the dam.

One of the anti-dam SMOs, *Folkeaksjonen*, “The People’s Action”, was based in Alta village, downstream of the dam. The planned dam threatened local subsistence fisheries, tourist industries, and related livelihood strategies. The chosen rhetorical strategy was to emphasise environmental rights in local campaigns, but Indigenous rights when targeting audiences outside the municipality (Ihlen, 2004, p. 181). Recent documentation shows that, from its very beginning, *Folkeaksjonen* was embedded in local organisational ties, including sports associations, business entrepreneurs, environmental organisations, all political parties, and the printing company of one of the local newspapers (Nilsen, 2019). This recent documentation provides new insights into how resources were generated during the conflict, and it seems that network building was

a highly effective strategy. The message was spread through campaigns and lobbying aimed at informing the public and policy. They obtained a network of allies locally and regionally before the conflict was radicalised in 1978–9, with the pro-dam parliamentary decision and anti-dam civil disobedience.

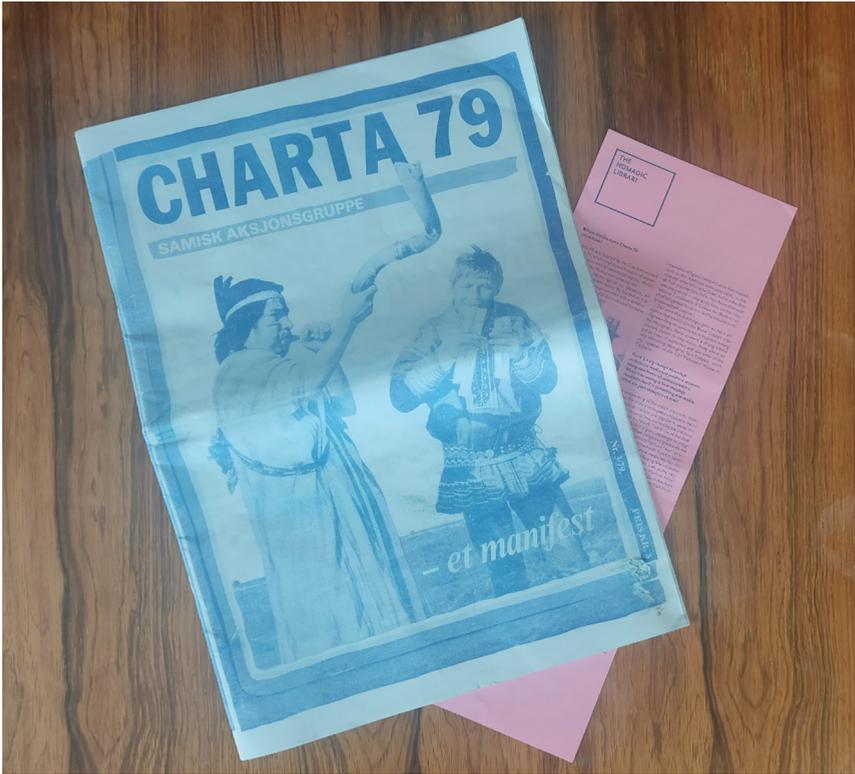


**Figure 1** From the hunger strike by Samisk aksjonsgruppe (Sami action group) in 1979. Left: Máret Sára, editor of *Charta 79*. Right: Niilas Somby, later known for an attempted sabotage action. (Reprinted from Somby, 2016, p. 47.)  
Photo: © Ánde Somby.

The other anti-dam SMO, *Samisk aksjonsgrupe*, “Sámi Action Group”, seems to have had its origins in the upstream Maze village, where the initial plans would have flooded the entire village, and a later, downscaled version would have threatened the migration routes of reindeer nomadism, a key livelihood adaptation within Sámi culture. Local protests from 1970 engaged the local artist collective. Recent documentation shows the collective as being central in an informal network of supporters for the first hunger strike for Indigenous rights, which took place in Oslo 1979 (Guttorm et al., 2020; Kuhn, 2020; Somby, 2022, 2016). The action idea

came from a group of radical Sámi activists who had been participating in civil disobedience actions in downstream Alta, but were dissatisfied with the moderation and lack of focus on Indigenous rights (Somby, 2022, p. 37). The hunger strike was staged in a public space as a spectacular action (Somby, 2016, 2022), and succeeded in changing the framing of the issue in the national media (Hjorthol, 2006). The hunger strike in 1979 led to unexpected public support for civil disobedience (Minde, 2003), leading to a steering crisis for the government. The government, as a result, gave in to some of the key demands, temporarily halting construction work, and starting the work of the Sámi rights commission, which would eventually lead to concrete constitutional reforms in 1989 (Minde, 2003). Recent documentation shows that the hunger strike, with its action newspaper *Charta 79*, was *improvised* by an *informal gathering* of persons (Somby, 2022, p. 38), however, the action group utilised a *conscious adaptation* of *action repertoires*, including collaboration with communication professionals (film makers) and academics (lawyers and social scientists), as well as inspiration from Kurdish comrades (Kuhn, 2020; Somby, 2022). This indicates that the informal action group behind the hunger strike probably had a more decisive impact than Minde (2003) found – something that should be further researched.

When a formal constitutional process was put in train in 1979, it was probably the result of the joint impact of rhetorical creativity and resource generation that resulted in networks of influence scaling out from Alta and Maze. A chief executive from the Norwegian Water Resources and Energy Directorate (NVE), the government bureau that planned the dam, said: “What made this a huge and difficult issue was the [I]ngenious issue the opponents raised when the river saviors and [those engaged in Sámi politics] joined forces. [...] That was pure genius” (Ihlen 2004, p. 180). The anti-dam issue was redefined from one about local livelihoods to Indigenous rights, and the pro-dam issue was re-defined from one about industrial growth to a defense of state sovereignty (Hjorthol, 2006). Thus, what started out as a conflict over industrialisation-versus-conservation mutated into a conflict over different democratic models: majoritarian democracy versus democratic pluralism (Jensen, 2015).



**Figure 2** Facsimile of *Charta 79*, issue no. 3, 1979, the newspaper made for the hunger strike by the Samisk aksjonsgruppe (Sámi Action Group). The facsimile was part of “The Nomadic Library”, a re-printing and research project by artists Joar Nango and Tanya Busse, for the exhibition “Let the River Flow. The Sovereign Will and the Making of a New Worldliness” at the Office for Contemporary Art, Norway, 2018. © Charta 79, Joar Nango and Tanya Busse.

By tracing the emergence of various formations in an informal cybernetic network, we have described some meso-level links between micro action and macro structure. This mechanism is qualitatively different from the aggregate of individual opinions, the latter being more relevant to explain voting behaviour. The two opposing movements responded to given opportunity structures, but also empowered themselves, gaining the capacity to open new opportunities at the structural level. When SMS and SCR approach networks at the meso level as mediating between micro action and macro structure (Diani, 2007, p. 341; Falkheimer & Heide, 2023, p. 9; Staggenborg, 2002, p. 125), this is relevant for a wider



**Figure 3** A view towards the Norwegian Parliament building from within a traditional Sámi tent (*lavvu*). Taken during the cast of the hunger strike action for the film *Ellos eatnu – la elva leve* (released 2023). Photo: © Beaska Niilas.

research front on the outcomes of social movements (Bailey & Mattei, 2013; Bosi & Uba, 2021). Here we find various conceptual resources that may be used in an analysis that continues where Ihlen (2004) ended his analysis of rhetoric and resources in the Alta Conflict, further diving into the flow of processes whereby the participants used rhetoric creatively to *generate* resources and *change* their relative positions in the social field.

*Firstly*, we may apply the conceptual dichotomies from Critical Theory to explain how rhetoric and resources impacted the macro level. During the Alta Conflict, both competing movements took *strategic action* to preserve and further their own vision of *democratic deliberation*. Thus, both acted within the tension between pure communicative action and pure strategic action, which we have seen in Habermas' (1981) understanding of "legalisation", as well as Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) concept of "(counter-)hegemony" (see section 3). The communicative actions from the *anti-dam* block could, on the one hand, be seen as expressions of (counter)hegemonic utterances (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001) as they rendered a totality out of plurality. On the other hand, the change in the *pro-dam posture*, with its emphasis on popular sovereignty, could also indicate that the *resistance to the dam* was not only comprised of victims of a system's "colonialisation" of their lifeworld (Habermas, 1981b). The social movement was actually important in changing the way some pro-dam representatives of the state system framed their cause. Paradoxically, perhaps, these changes in the way the dominant state system framed its cause, may also have reduced the potential for further progress by the resistance block. The dynamics between the resistance and the pro-dam blocks may indicate less "agonism" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001) or less one-way street "colonialising" than suggested by Habermas (Habermas, 1981b). Rather we see a dynamic exchange and change of frames in a wider discursive field, encompassing both social movement(s) and representative political systems. It might be that Critical Theory's dichotomous conception of the relation between micro and macro is well fit to discover structural limitations, but it seems to be overly deterministic and simplistic regarding the scope of action – and especially interaction – in the form of co-creation, joint impact, and the emergence of critical junctures.

*Secondly*, and alternatively, we may apply dualistic models offered by so-called practice theories, which have been used by various researchers of

social movement communication (see section 3).<sup>10</sup> For Giddens (1984, p. 2), social networks are long chains of regular social interaction, which constitute “social practices ordered through space and time”, thus reproducing and transforming social structures. Indeed, this is what happened when the anti-dam bloc congregated across localities, scaled up their spatial scope of action, and moved the sites of struggle to the capital city. Bourdieu (1977, p. 83) offers a more complex model, arguing that social networks are chains of concrete events determined by structural habits, and that when several causal chains at various durations happen to meet in a conjuncture, a concrete event may change a structural habit. Such a conjuncture happened during the hunger strike in 1979, which became a critical juncture setting in train the formal constitutional process. Such practice theories of the macro-micro relation may be characterised as dualistic rather than dichotomous, enabling us to discover actual possibilities for empowering action.

As rival theories, Critical Theory and so-called practice theories offer competing sets of analytical concepts, and both may be used for explanatory analysis. It seems that practice theories, with their dualistic models, are better fit to account for how micro action may impact macro structures via the mediating meso networks. This seems to fit the Alta Conflict, which is a “deviant case” not only because “new social movements” seldom gain constituent power (Bailey & Mattei, 2013; della Porta, 2020), but also because they exceptionally gain such power in “corporatist democracies” (Dryzek et al., 2006). However, one may suspect that Critical Theory, with its dichotomous models, may be better fit to account for the determinants imposed by structural limitations in most cases. Therefore, there may be a need for further research to bridge the gap between the two rival theories. One possible pathway might be to build further on Marchi (2021), who interpreted Gramsci (2021) in an innovative way by tracing “molecular transformations” of “cultural hegemony”, including legal order. Though Gramsci (2021) was less negative than Habermas (198b) towards Marxian value theory, that approach may nevertheless indicate a direction for how the terms “juridification” and “(counter-) hegemony” may be bridged with empirical tracing of meso networks.

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10 Habermas is deeply critical of the practice perspective qua production perspective, which he sees as reductionist (Habermas, 1987). He argues that emancipation emerges not from a production perspective but from “the paradigm of action toward mutual understanding” (Habermas, 1987, p. 82). One may, however, ask whether Habermas himself is reducing the context for emancipation by precisely this assumption.

In this analysis, we have refrained from assuming that the dominant political block constituted a fixed structure, instead *historicising* both the dominant and political block, by *tracing the becoming* of both of them. Thus, we have applied the concepts and methods of Critical Theory to social movement communication as democratic innovation. However, the empirical results call for an amendment to the concepts. When we refrain from *reifying* the dominant order, we gain empirical data that lead us to question if there might be a tendency towards *a priori* reification of the dominant order in the concept of “hegemony” as used by Laclau and Mouffe (2001), as well as the concept of “legalisation” in Habermas (1981b).

While Ihlen (2004) mapped static positions of rhetoric and resources in a social field, we traced the becoming of such positionings, leading to an empirical re-actualisation of a well-known critique within Critical Theory, against overly structuralist conceptualisations.

## Conclusions

This analysis indicates some of the ways whereby strategic communication may not only empower the already powerful, but also empower the underprivileged. Thus, strategic communication not only amplifies existing exclusion from the public sphere, but may also contribute to a more inclusive public sphere. Thus, strategic communication may, under some conditions, contribute to democratic innovation, through a disruptive deepening of deliberative democracy. The analysis indicates that such an event may take place as the result of *mutual adaptation* between competing political blocks, each of them applying rhetorical creativity to generate resources, in a process where network building forms agenda setting.

To search for such potentials, we have sought to overcome the specialisation between communication research (SCR) and social movement studies (SMS). We have worked within a specific research tradition, empirically grounded Critical Theory, used by some researchers within both SCR and SMS who share an interest in empowerment and democratisation. In previous research, the Alta Conflict has been studied using an SMS approach as a case of social movements as transformative power (Jensen, 2015), and using an SCR approach as a case of how relative positions in the social field may determine the combined power of rhetoric and resources (Ihlen, 2004). By combining both perspectives, and updating the case study with new historical evidence, we have uncovered

how, in some cases, social movement communication may contribute to transform the positions within the social field, generating resources by exercising rhetoric.

On the one hand, the findings have implications for public policy locally in Norway and Sápmi, or in the ideographic dimension. In line with earlier analysis of the case in comparative democracy research (Dalland, 1997, pp. 41–42; Dryzek et al., 2003, pp. 26–27; Johnsen, 2021, p. 23), we see the Alta Conflict as a phase of disruptive democratic innovation. However, we also find that the strategic framings of the pro- and anti-dam blocks co-evolved into a conflict about how to define already established democratic norms. In terms of SMS on democratisation (della Porta, 2013; 2020), it seems that the pro-dam block represented a restricted form of liberal-deliberative democracy, whereas the anti-dam block presented an oppositional form of participatory-deliberative democracy. When adapting to each other, both blocks contributed to the actual democratic innovation that took place. With regard to the Norwegian state-commissioned Power and Democracy Research (1998–2003), our analysis suggests (a) that internal disagreements within the commission (Eriksen, 2003) correspond with the conflict lines during the Alta case, but also, (b) that the process of democratic innovation was not only driven by the anti-dam block, a dimension observed by a case study commissioned by that project (Minde, 2003), but was also the product of joint impact and co-evolution between both blocks, and finally, (c) that lobbying and actionism may, at times, be empowering for the disempowered, contrary to what is suggested in their conclusion (Norwegian Official Report, 2003, § 13). Though the Alta Conflict as democratic innovation continues to be a contentious topic, something that is typical of historical SMS cases (Bosi & Reiter, 2014), the time may be ripe for further research into the case, especially in lieu of the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2018–2023) and related public deliberation (Johnsen, 2021).<sup>11</sup> Our chapter provides a stepping-stone for further organisational analysis of social movement communication, which seems compatible with the organisational approach used in the Power and Democracy Research (Olsen, 1978, p. 24). In particular the inquiry into the “boundary work” of social movements (the construction of in-groups and out-groups for movements), and how this may be understood within a

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11 Following Habermas (1985), even the civil disobedience of the form used in the Alta conflict has been seen as *communicative action* contributing to informal deliberative practice (Lysaker, 2022).

wider societal and contested context, could be one of the points of departure for future research on social movement communication as democratic innovation.

Additionally, the findings indicate some further developments of concepts and methods for the study of social movement communication as democratic innovation, the nomothetic dimension. Our analysis has indicated how rhetorical creativity may lead to resource generation, and, to the co-evolution of two competing social movement coalitions (in this case one pro-dam and one anti-dam coalition of SMOs). *Firstly*, the case study demonstrates the merits of an approach to research on social movement communication that combines the specialised research interests of SCR and SMS, and applies historicising methods, in sum helping to uncover processes of empowerment, as well as co-evolution between dominant and emerging actors. *Secondly*, our analysis slightly disconfirms (by testing) a tendency within Critical Theory towards *a priori* reification of dominant power structures. It seems that Habermas (1981b) may be overly critical to “juridification” as he conceptualises it, and the same applies to Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) take on “hegemony”. These foundational social thinkers, and thus the research streams relying on them, may lack some of the *complex dynamics* of the dominant coalition and the oppositional coalition as emergent phenomena at the meso level – as social movement coalitions. It might for example be that conceptualisations of the system according to Habermas (1981b) and hegemony according to Laclau and Mouffe (2001) are both encumbered with an *a priori* reification of the established social order and too segregated from the lifeworld and scenes for political grass-root mobilisation.

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