10 Sensing and Seizing Opportunities

How Contentious Actors and Strategies Emerge

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CONTENTIOUS ACTION can be depicted as a struggle between more or less established players, in a given field or arena, about some fixed desired goal. In the introduction to this volume, Jasper proposes to adopt this kind of strategic perspective: "We need to develop causal mechanisms that apply across many arenas. I think that a more strategic perspective, focusing on arenas and on players with ends and means, is the way to accomplish that." This contribution questions the essentialized character underlying strategic reasoning: are players established, arenas given, and goals fixed? By focusing on discursive opportunities, we propose to ask how players and goals emerge and develop under the influence of changing policy discourses. Specifically, we point to policy processes in which problems, solutions, and actors are defined and positioned. This process involves the shaping of emotions and cognitions (Bröer and Duyvendak 2009).

This chapter builds on recent theorizing about discursive opportunities. In line with Jasper's argument and critically reviewing our own earlier statements, we abandon the structure portion of the discursive opportunity structure concept. While we agree that "structure" might be a misleading concept, we still think that "opportunity" is a useful heuristic device. Changing policy discourses do open up new chances for mobilization. In that sense, they constitute an opportunity. To give one example: political recognition of rights for one ethnic group is easily followed by claims for similar rights from other groups or people claiming to form a group. This kind of opportunity falls halfway

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between the long-term rules of the game—often summarized as "opportunity structures," and the short-term "mistakes" that, according to Jasper, constitute opportunities proper.

In this chapter we will elaborate on discursive opportunity theory and point to mechanisms that shape activism, focusing on the field of policy making. The emergence of and changes in the field itself are not considered here (Goodwin and Jasper 1999/2004a, b; Verhoeven 2009).

Elsewhere we demonstrate the overall correlation of discursive opportunities and activism (Bröer 2006, 2008; Bröer and Duyvendak 2009). Here, the focus is on typical interactions. People learn how to feel and act when they focus on an issue, internalize its meaning, or take a critical stance on the basis of prior experiences. Mechanisms like these are explained and exemplified.

The findings presented here a part of a larger investigation into aircraft noise annoyance (Bröer and Wirth 2004; Bröer 2006, 2007, 2008; Kroesen and Bröer 2009). That research started with the observation that noise annoyance complaints and protest seem to react to noise annoyance policy, rather than the other way around. If policy discourse shapes problem perception and political (in)action, then we should see different noise "problems" in different policy settings. We found just this in a cross-country comparison of policy discourse and popular discourse on aircraft noise (in letters, complaints, inquiries, and interviews) in the Netherlands and Switzerland. These differences in perceptions of the problem matched differences in policy discourse. Furthermore, differences within each case were variations in the policy discourse. The qualitative research showed that people perceived the aircraft sound in a way that was consonant with the policy discourse or deviated only partly from it. A quantitative retest confirmed the earlier results (Kroesen and Bröer 2009).

Discursive Opportunities and Resonance

Discourse is a pattern in language use (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Hajer 1995; Steinberg 1998; Howarth 2000; Wetherell et al. 2001; Yates et al. 2001; Howarth and Torfing 2005). It is not the content of one specific utterance or newspaper clipping. A policy discourse comprises opportunities and limitations for political action; it legitimizes certain concerns and forms of engagement and delegitimizes others.

Discourses, in our definition, convey meaning, whereas structure as such cannot do that. Discourses also contain cognition and emotion. Earlier we said

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that people mobilize "not only because they were informed about the possibilities, as Koopmans and Olzak would suggest . . . they conceived of these openings as real opportunities because they started to *feel* differently about their situation and their capacity to change it. Therefore, the regulation of feelings needs to be included in a discursive opportunity model" (Bröer and Duyvendak 2009, p. 353). A discourse then comprises "framing and feeling rules" (Hochschild 1979): what can be said, demanded, expected, and felt in a specific situation. This "selection," the dominance of a certain discourse, is its central political element.

These discourses are not translating structural characteristics of political systems, as POS theory would have it; the discourses themselves are providing opportunities or limitations to be sensed and seized. This relative autonomy of discursive opportunities is clearly stated by Koopmans (Koopmans and Statham 1999; Koopmans 2004; Koopmans and Olzak 2004). But his Discursive Opportunity Structure approach misses the wider political power of discourse and neglects the role of feelings. The dominance or hegemony of certain discourses escapes Koopmans' attention, perhaps because of his methodological orientation. Koopmans and coworkers mainly approach discourse as the content of media coverage. Instead, we consider discourse as the politically relevant pattern in both texts and practices. Discourse then shapes activism not only through the literal content of, for example, media messages, but more profoundly through what cannot be said or felt.

The first step toward mechanisms is the concept of *resonance*, used both in framing literature (Schudson 1989; Steinberg 1998; Benford and Snow 2000; Ettema 2005) and discourse research (Koopmans and Olzak 2004; Bröer and Duyvendak 2009). Resonance means echo or repercussion. Discourse resonance can take the form of consonance, which means a close resemblance between a dominant (policy) discourse and people's perception. Resonance can also mean dissonance: a partial rejection of and partial agreement with a dominant discourse. And of course, there may be no resonance of a dominant discourse at all, while people still strive for the recognition of an issue.

We have shown that a specific policy discourse resonates in the way citizens and activists experience an issue. For example, how people think and feel about aircraft noise and how they oppose it (see Box 1). Because aircraft noise policy is different in the Netherlands and Switzerland, one can observe different perceptions of noise, different methods of protest, and different kinds of social movement organization. Those differences cannot directly be related to

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vast concepts such as "political culture" or changes, for example, in government coalition, as in POS theory.

Resonance theory can be further clarified in comparison to the concept of strategic action, as in Jasper's opening statement, for example, and in comparison to Koopmans' evolutionary approach.

Emergence

A model of social movements as strategic action presupposes given players with certain goals. It has been stated many times that strategic action is bounded by lack of information, insight, time, and so on. But this is not the main point, since it only concerns the quality of the strategy. A more fundamental question is how players come to define their goals and themselves. And how do we explain that people cherish opposing goals? These goals are not given but have a sociological origin as well. Furthermore, in addition to goal-oriented action, we might assume that humans act on the basis of value orientation, on the basis of tradition or routine, and on the basis of emotion as well.

Our own constructivist model applies the idea of "action" to actors and strategies themselves: one has to analyze how these are socially constructed.

Koopmans (2005) generated insight by turning POS into an evolutionary model. Players slowly emerge in the long run in reaction to changing opportunities and in reaction to information about the mobilization efforts of other players. Koopmans proposes what we might call "the blind activist" model: through trial and error, actors unconsciously adjust their strategies to what is successful. This is a decidedly macrostructural model, contrary to the micromodel of Jasper, in which strategic action, players, and goals figure prominently.

While Koopmans opens up the possibility of analyzing changing goals and emerging players, he neglects reflexivity, which makes for a crucial difference between species evolution and cultural changes.

The evolutionary perspective considers discursive opportunities as information to which actors adapt, and if they don't adapt successfully they vanish. For the rest, the actors remain stable. Here, Koopmans' evolutionary approach misses a crucial difference between biological and cultural changes. In species evolution, changes in the environment do not directly affect the makeup of a living organism, only its life chances. But in the evolution of cultural forms, changes in the discursive field directly affect the present actors who are, in part, reflexive cultural beings. There is no clear divide between a movement actor

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and public discourse. Actors actively construct the public discourse through interpretation and by sending out information themselves. In the same process movement actors reflexively constitute themselves. Activists do not plainly read a message from a text and act accordingly, as the evolutionary perspective suggests. Instead, people bring a host of interpretations and experiences to the scene. In the interaction between a dominant discourse concerning a certain issue and prior experience, people form a subject position.

To give an example: in the process leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, citizens of the former German Democratic Republic redefined themselves under the influence of changing political discourse, first as "We are the people" (Wir sind das Volk) and later into "We are one people" (Wir sind ein Volk). This was more than adaptation to a changing discourse: the actors themselves changed the public discourse and the stakes of the conflict simultaneously.

In contrast to Koopmans (2005, p. 21), who states that in an evolutionary perspective "actors' choices may ultimately reflect structural opportunities," we emphasize that actors themselves come about under the influence of discursive opportunities as they manifest themselves in the policy process. Here, we might agree with Foucault's notion of subjectivity as a product of discursive practices. But any discursive practice is only one of many in which humans engage or have engaged and which altogether shape their subjectivity. People actively define themselves in relation to a dominant discourse. The model of Koopmans (and Foucault in this respect) is too deterministic: the effect of a dominant discourse can be consonance but also dissonance. Or, people might not be affected at all.

A discourse, furthermore, is field or issue specific. In a process of learning, the feeling and framing rules of a discourse are internalized, perceived, used, challenged, or confronted with other rules. New discursive opportunities and limitations, altered under the influence of activism, can resonate in subsequent actions.

A discourse is never all-encompassing or closed because it contains internal possibilities for contradiction (evoking the external as necessary point of reference) and it can contradict other discourses. Again, these contradictions have to be perceived as such by people. They have to evaluate cognitively and/or emotionally a (potentially dominant) discourse. The result of that evaluation under the pressure of a field-specific discourse is a fragmentation of political subjectivity.

In sum, this is a constructivist model of social movements: we plead for an embedded and contextual understanding of actors, goals, and strategies. Opportunities play an important role, both in the genesis of political actors (their

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subjectivity) and in what they consider appropriate goals and strategies (in line with their framing and feeling rules).

We can demonstrate that there is a close affinity between a dominant policy discourse on a specific issue and people's perceptions of that issue. People's perceptions are formed through an active engagement with dominant feeling and framing rules. As usual, however, a causal argument is hard to make. It is possible to show that policy makers devise certain policies before they encounter large-scale protest. And it is possible to show that certain story-lines, metaphors, or frames are deliberately invented by experts. To establish a causal argument, a closer look at mechanisms is needed. One has to show how discursive opportunities might translate into human conduct.

Is This Framing?

In the literature on contentious action, "framing" is often portrayed as strategic action by given social movement organizations. The discussion on this and on related issues has already been documented (Benford 1997; Steinberg 1998; Benford and Snow 2000). Suffice to say that we hold the following assumptions.

First, in line with Goffman (1975) we hold that framing is always at least partly based on people's tacit assumptions about the world. Second, people actively and reflexively participate in framing. Third, framing of political issues extends beyond movement organizations. Following a Foucauldian approach we include the formation of meaning in discursive practices, and we especially include the mundane activities of policy making (Hajer 1995). An example of the latter is a complaint agency; once an authority installs a complaint agency concerning issue X, this tacitly signals to citizens that they are entitled to complain. X is reframed, and the question then arises if and how practices associated with the issue affect people's perception and identity and thereby chances for mobilization.

The mechanisms we will describe below to some extent involve reconfiguring frames of mind. Snow et al. (1986) coined the concept of "frame alignment" for this process, defined as "the linkage or conjunction of individual and SMO (social movement organization, CB/JWD) interpretive frameworks" (p. 467). More particularly, the authors introduced the following concepts:

1. Frame bridging: when two similar yet unconnected frames are combined by the activities of social movement organizations.

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2. Frame amplification: when an existing frame of mind is strengthened or clarified by the activities of social movement organizations.
3. Frame extension: when the social movement organizations succeed in installing their frame in the minds of new people. Here, basic values are tapped, therefore there is some overlap with frame bridging.
4. Frame transformation: the implant of new values and meaning or the complete abandoning of old ideas (p. 473–74), similar to what Goffman calls conversion.

Frame alignment differs from our constructivist discourse model in several respects. First, frame alignment is about the efforts of movement organizations. Here we look at changes among potential activists. These changes are no solitary musings but part of policy implementation, organizational activities, discussions, confrontations, informational gatherings, and other discursive practices.

Second, the frame alignment model focuses on given movement organizations' activities, on their strategic framing efforts. We instead take meaning making and framing to be more dispersed processes. Since actors are constantly evolving, their goals are "under construction" and switching over time as well.

Third, the frame alignment approach focuses on cognitions. We include explicitly framing and feeling rules in our discourse model (see, for example, Jasper 1998; Flam and King 2005). A discourse is made up of what Arlie Hochschild (1979, 1983) calls *framing rules* and *feeling rules*. Framing rules refer to "the rules according to which we ascribe definitions or meanings to situations," and she defines feeling rules as "guidelines for the assessment of fits and misfits between feeling and situation" (1979, p. 566). Social processes affect the way potential activists experience their emotions. As Hochschild (1979, p. 567) puts it: "One can defy an ideological stance not simply by maintaining an alternative frame on a situation but by maintaining an alternative set of feeling rights and obligations."

At this point, we turn to the mechanisms that link changing discursive opportunities and potential activists.

Learning How to Feel and Act

The basic process of discourse resonance is learning how to think, feel, and act. Learning can go unnoticed, as in the theory of Koopmans, and it can be an evaluation and reflexive application of acquired framing and feeling rules. Learning comprises the shaping of cognitions and emotions.

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When it comes to political action, learning can take different forms: focusing on an issue, internalizing its preconceived meaning, or converting (changing a point of view). These three processes (re)produce a discourse, leading to consonance, yet processes of critically evaluating and exploiting a discourse lead to dissonant positions. Last, we point to "avoiding" as a way of not dealing with a discourse. Below, we detail these processes and present empirical support.

Focusing

Our attention to a given issue is guided by prior experiences and current issue salience. Issues are more salient when they are "mediatized" or tackled in policy. A new issue gets attention if its importance is established by linking it to a recognized and important issue, a perceived cleavage, or dominant framing and feeling rules.

The degree to which meaning is preformed can differ. The meaning of Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* and its effect on our attention are based on a range of existing symbols. In contrast, "9/11," at least in the first days, lacked much preformed meaning.

The focusing mechanism happens in small-scale interactions. You can test it yourself: tell your friends and family repeatedly about an issue you are interested in; they will report that, since talking to you, they have noticed the issue more often. This happened in our noise research too; people reported being more sensitive after the appointment for an interview was made.

Focusing is itself only a first step in the emergence of new actors and goals. It is necessary that the object of focus is defined in a certain way and that this definition is internalized.

Internalizing

If focusing is repeated, if the object of focus is defined in a certain way, and if these definitions are supported by practices, then a specific focus of attention will be internalized. Internalization is cumulative and especially strong when a policy discourse is dominant for a long period and becomes taken for granted. We present two examples of the internalization mechanism.

Noise annoyance due to aircraft sound shows a remarkable trend: less and less aircraft noise is needed to annoy people (Guski 2003; Bröer et al. 2005; Babisch et al. 2009), while no corresponding trend exists for cars or railways.

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Moreover, the trend follows large-scale and partly successful noise annoyance policy. Thus, while several countries have succeeded in limiting aircraft sound exposure or holding it constant, people are increasingly annoyed by the sound. This difference between the quantified magnitude of exposure to a hazard and popular perception of the hazard is a well-known phenomenon in risk research. For example, few worried about air quality in Western Europe a hundred years ago, when it was much worse than now.

This paradox might be explained by the (successful) policy itself: a policy for aircraft noise sends a number of messages:

- There is a problem urgent enough to be addressed by (national) policy.
- Sound pressure is the main problem, noise has to be limited.
- People are victims of the noise load (and not, for example, the culprit)
- People have a right to feel annoyed.

We can see that noise policy contains framing rules and feeling rules. It contains a focus of attention (sound), a definition of a problem (noise load), an entitlement to certain feelings (annoyance), and the implication of a collective interest (silence). The way noise policy addresses people also configures them as "citizens" or "population" or "stakeholders." Literally, "stakes" are often part of the noise annoyance policy definition.

We have described elsewhere (Bröer and Duyvendak 2009) that this takes different forms in different contexts. The Dutch policy focuses on the general population, which leads people to define themselves as part of that population. The Swiss noise annoyance policy, on the contrary, defines citizens as local stakeholders. Consequently, attention is directed at the local effects of air-mobility, and mobilization is local or regional.

Noise policy legitimates existing and new complaints about noise. It reorganizes cognition (defines a problem as important) and emotion (legitimizes concern). A necessary condition is the visibility of the policy, and a mediating factor is implementation; the policy as implemented contains discursive opportunities and limitations.

In a process perspective, increasing noise annoyance can thus be understood as an unwanted "success" of noise policy; in various discursive practices, people have internalized the issue and react to noise on the basis of noise policy discourse.

Learning how to think and feel about an issue is an active process of involvement, but it can also go unnoticed. Previously, we have shown that noise

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complaints differ in the Netherlands and Switzerland. About one-fourth of the complaints are almost perfectly in line with the administrative and political demands of the complaint agencies. The Dutch agency asks citizens to report all noise events, which they readily do. In Switzerland, the complaint agency offers information about the cause of the noise, which is what many citizens ask for. Furthermore, the number of complaints follows calls for active involvement by policy makers and partly by oppositional groups. Next to these consonant complaints, we discuss below complaints in which people try to go against the administrative procedures.

Converting

Sometimes the process of learning is explicit, involving a noticeable switch from one set of feeling and framing rules to another. We present one example, in which the conversion leads a protest group to adopt the discourse of other groups and of the governmental noise policy.

In 1998, citizens of a small town near Zurich, Switzerland, started an organization called Committee Against Aircraft Noise. A general reduction of flight movements, they figured and claimed, would reduce or prevent noise exposure for all Swiss. The Committee targeted national noise policy. Around the same time, the Cantonal government changed its noise policy, starting a policy of redistributing flights. Redistribution was also meant to allow for further airport growth at Zurich Kloten. This policy was presented to all surrounding municipalities, involving citizens and stakeholders in extensive communication and consultation. Within a period of three years, about 50 new organizations were set up. In addition, most city councils and other political organizations entered the redistribution debate and a fierce discussion about "who gets what" ensued. Almost all groups and bodies argued for a different local distribution to protect their own areas. This discussion also affected the Committee Against Aircraft Noise. After extensive internal debates, the group stated that it was no longer feasible or strategically sound to strive for a national solution. They felt forced to plea for local noise protection, instead. They thus converted from a national or even universalist frame to a particularistic frame. More than merely a matter of cognition, the new, local-protection frame was also attractive because it offered a right to be concerned, in this case about the deterioration of one's "Heimat."

So far, we have isolated parts of a learning process (focusing, internalizing, and converting) in which a dominant discourse (framing and feeling rules) is

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gradually taken over by movement-activists-in-the-making. The last example, a movement organization's conversion, shows that discourse resonance does not happen in a vacuum. The new policy discourse first contradicted an existing discourse of activists. In the case of conversion, the contradiction was fully resolved. This comes close to Koopmans' gradual adaptation to discursive opportunities. In the ensuing discussion, however, we point to mechanisms in which these contradictions partly remain.

Using the Dominant Discourse

Activists often use the language and practices of a dominant policy to strive for their own goals and to oppose a policy. They might, for example, enter a committee to (try to) change its agenda. Discursively, the strategy of using a field has a "yes . . . but" structure. Hajer (1995) points to this as a "discursive paradox." One enters a field by agreeing and then adds divergent thoughts and feelings. Here, we want to point to the long-term consequences of this strategy: (1) actors themselves change through the internalization of dominant feeling and framing rules, and (2) actors support goals inherent in the dominant discourse. Three examples demonstrate how this works.

1. Friends of the Earth

In the Netherlands, environmental activists of Friends of the Earth (FoE) started to spearhead aircraft noise around 1994, roughly five years after the national government had reframed airport development as a matter of ecological modernization. Part of that policy was the introduction of noise limits and contours, intended to limit growth in this noise-polluting industry. In the beginning, learning about noise contours and decibels constituted a deliberate attempt to become an expert player in the field the policy had defined and then use that access to introduce other policy measures as well. Although things did not work out that way—FoE ultimately could not prevent the growth of Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport—the professionalization of the activist had other effects. In our interviews and contacts with them, activists had difficulties in approaching aircraft noise from a nonacoustic paradigm. Repeatedly, they suggested that any approach other than noise contours and acoustic limits would serve the interest of the industry. Sometimes they displayed anger about different approaches, which reveals the emotional value of the acquired position. Moreover, what started as an attempt to seize an opportunity became a taken-for-granted definition of a contested issue. The

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adherence to the acoustic paradigm also strengthened the policy discourse activists wished to challenge.

2. Serial Complainers

Earlier we showed that the number and content of noise complaints closely followed changes in discursive construction of noise, as changes in policy legitimated concern and complaints. The widespread political attention for possible complaints made people focus on noise, and the government's responsiveness made it wise to participate by filing a complaint. The policy process in the Netherlands gave rise to serial complainers: people filing thousands of complaints per year. Such behavior is often full of contradictions and reflexivity. Citizens file a complaint while simultaneously trying to change the complaint procedure and policy. In a limited way, they follow the course of the activists of FoE: they learn how to complain professionally in order to enter the policy process. Let's take a look at one example of the thousands of complaint forms stored in the Netherlands (see Figure 10.1).

This person in 2000 addresses the complaint agency through a letter, although the agency also facilitates digital complaints. Letters tend to allow for more diverse ways to express criticism and discontent, and this one shows a typical mixture of administrative requirements, arguments, and emotional expressions.

After addressing the reader, the author opens with "Here we go again !!!!" referring to his earlier complaints, but also commenting on the procedure. The second sentence starts: "Once again, the period from 12-1-2000 till 27-1-2000 was motivation for Schiphol to choose Akersloot [the village] as a sightseeing spot for tourists and freight carriers, which is proven by the list below." He evaluates policy and expresses frustration. His tone suggests that complaining is ineffective, while at the same time he is making an effort to document the noise problem.

The list contains thirty flights, documented with date and time. This is exactly what the complaint agency asks for: time and date of noisy flights in order to file each date as a separate complaint. The handwritten line on the dates stems from the agency employee who filed these data. As an experienced complainer, this man knows the procedure. He knows that only the details of the complaints are recorded, yet he uses the complaint to add much more: the cynical "here we go again" and a scale for noisiness: "* = too much noise, ** = way too low and very noisy, *** = immediately remove from airspace." In the text line, he introduces the four-star category "**** = A number of planes (often the same ones !!!!!!!) are so way out of line that they should be taken out of airspace immediately and never allowed to come back."

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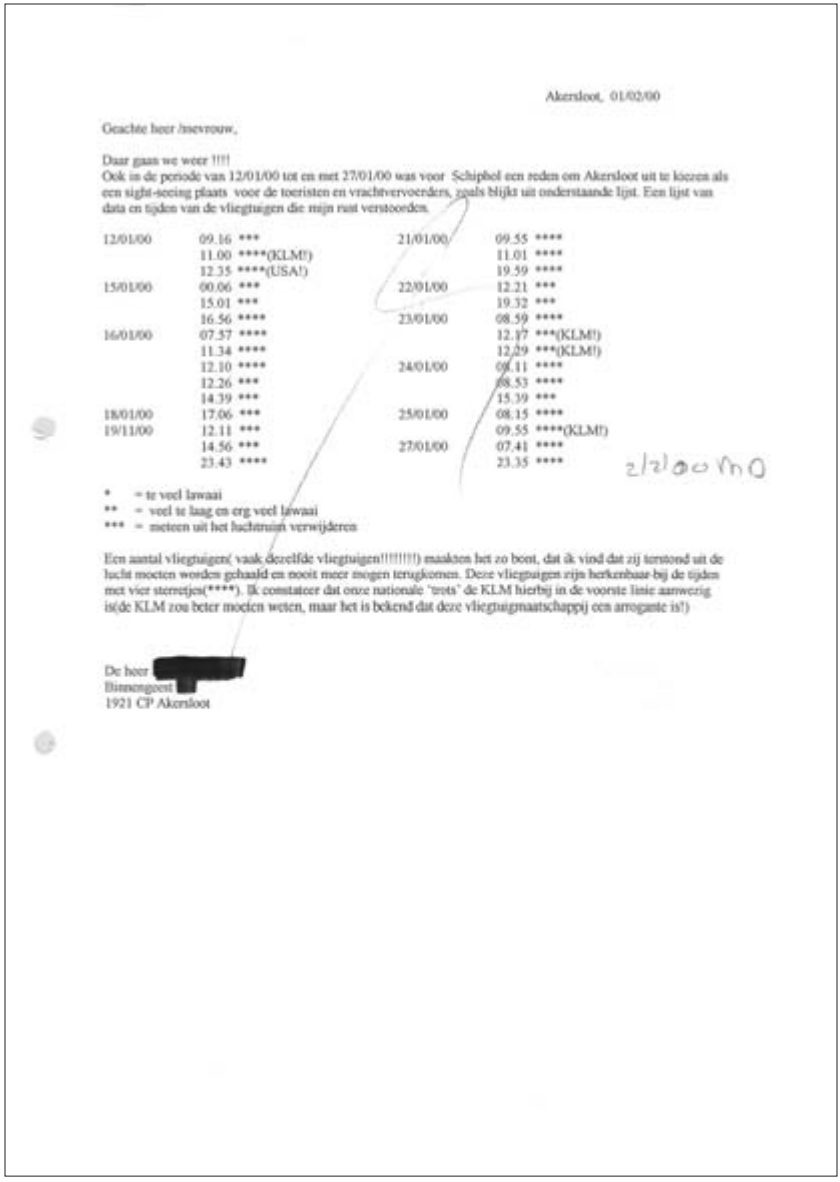

Akersloot, 01/02/00

Geachte heer /mevrouw,

Daar gaan we weer !!!!
Ook in de periode van 12/01/00 tot en met 27/01/00 was voor Schiphol een reden om Akersloot uit te kiezen als een sight-seeing plaats voor de toeristen en vrachtvervoerders, zoals blijkt uit onderstaande lijst. Een lijst van data en tijden van de vliegtuigen die mijn rust verstoorden.

12/01/00	09.16 ***	21/01/00	09.55 ****
	11.00 ****(KLM!)		11.01 ****
	12.35 ****(USA!)		19.59 ****
15/01/00	00.06 ***	22/01/00	12.21 ***
	15.01 ***		19.32 ***
	16.56 ****	23/01/00	08.59 ****
16/01/00	07.57 ****		12.17 ***(KLM!)
	11.34 ****		12.29 ***(KLM!)
	12.10 ****	24/01/00	08.11 ****
	12.26 ***		08.53 ****
	14.39 ***		15.39 ***
18/01/00	17.06 ***	25/01/00	08.15 ****
19/11/00	12.11 ***		09.55 ****(KLM!)
	14.56 ***	27/01/00	07.41 ****
	23.43 ****		23.35 ****

2/2/00 mO

* = te veel lawaai
** = veel te laag en erg veel lawaai
*** = meteen uit het luchtruim verwijderen

Een aantal vliegtuigen(vaak dezelfde vliegtuigen!!!!!!!!) maakten het zo boen, dat ik vind dat zij terstond uit de lucht moeten worden gehaald en nooit meer mogen terugkomen. Deze vliegtuigen zijn herkenbaar bij de tijden met vier sterretjes(****). Ik constateer dat onze nationale 'trots' de KLM hierbij in de voorste linie aanwezig is(de KLM zou beter moeten weten, maar het is bekend dat deze vliegtuigmaatschappij een arrogante is!)

De heer [redacted]
Binnengoest
1921 CP Akersloot

FIGURE 10.1 A Typical Letter of Complaint
SOURCE: From the archives of the Committee for Regional Consultation Schiphol.

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There are more details, but the structure is evident: complainants use a standard procedure in standard and nonstandard ways at the same time. The letter contains arguments, recommendations, and a policy evaluation; at the same time, it contains anger and frustration (eighteen exclamation marks, considerable cynicism). The internal contradiction between using the complaint form and discontent about the procedure is one of the main features of the complaints procedure itself. It has been made so easy and almost obligatory to complain, while at the same time there is no clear or visible effect of complaints. Complainants who use the procedure for criticizing it are nonetheless supporting it at the same time. Facilitating mass complaining has locked some citizens into this administrative procedure.

3. Soundnet

In 2003, two young Internet experts privately discussed the "situation at Schiphol," angry about authorities' claim that the current sound measurement devices were the best available. The young technicians figured they could come up with a cheaper and, most of all, more democratic alternative, which would also generate new types of information.

Instead of a small number of sophisticated measuring devices run by the airport and government, they imagined a network of inexpensive microphones at people's houses linked through the Internet. By so doing, an average of measurement errors could be gauged and people would be provided with their own technical tools. The solution was so simple, they argued, that any child could do it. Hence, their logo of the first few years showed a child measuring noise by holding up a microphone.

This move was immediately successful because it appealed to three basic features of the public debate: (1) the amount of measured noise is the biggest problem, (2) people should participate in the policy process, (3) the authorities' statistics should not be trusted. Now, whereas statements 1 and 2 can be found in the dominant policy discourse, statement 3 establishes a dissonant or critical position: "yes . . . but."

Soon households and local communities were participating in the program called Soundnet. Gradually it turned into a commercial enterprise with a sophisticated technical apparatus. In the same period governmental noise statistics were made public and refined. Above all, this intervention stressed the dominance of the acoustic and technical approach to noise. However, while it enhanced people's capacities to document their immediate acoustic situation, it did not contribute to a different understanding of the problem.

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The three preceding examples, highlighting the experiences of Friends of the Earth, serial complainers, and Soundnet, all illustrate people's tendency to use dominant discursive practices within a field, and to strive for different goals. They first enter the discursive field referring to nondominant, often opposing discourses, then typically employ a "yes . . . but" structure in their arguments in order to engage in discursive struggle. This partial agreement allows for a critical distance and for emotional expression. At the same time, people become emotionally and cognitively attached to the dominant discourse. In all three examples, the countermoves support the very field one is trying to change.

Avoiding

In the face of a dominant policy discourse, people may try to avoid the issue altogether (Eliasoph 1997). Typically, the argumentative and emotional form is "no . . . but." People may withdraw into the private sphere, as did some of our interviewees who started by complaining or working for a social movement organization, but soon enough saw that they could not stand up against other parties. Typically, they evoked other socially available discourses to back up their position. Also, people tended to exaggerate the issue-specific discourse in order to distance themselves from it. As in the process of "using" a discourse, we clearly see the active and reflexive capacity of people.

A different kind of avoidance is visible with the Dutch organization, Acoustic Environment Protection Foundation. This group is not directly concerned with aircraft noise but with acoustic pollution in general, in a clear departure from the dominant political discourse that organizes the noise problem according to sources. The foundation claims that unwanted sound is a form of violence, while barely addressing the dominant noise discourse. It presents a cultural critique of noise as an unwanted part of modernity (Bijsterveld 2008) and technology. The foundation intentionally seeks support from specific groups of citizens rather than governmental or scientific entities, and its supporters include well-known artists and academics. Although it has a fundamental approach to noise, it actively avoids dealing with established noise problems related to traffic or neighborhoods.

Avoidance is partly a critique, and partly the construction of an alternative discourse altogether.

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Conclusion

In response to thoughtful criticisms of political opportunity structures (Goodwin and Jasper 1999/2004a, b), we propose to abandon structuralist and other deterministic explanations of contentious action. More specifically, we address discursive opportunities. However, rejecting structuralist explanations does not necessarily imply a turn to voluntaristic approaches of collective action. We agree with Jasper and others that we have to take seriously actors' strategic considerations regarding goals and strategies, and we plea for an embedded and contextual understanding of these actors, their goals and strategies. In this constructivist understanding, opportunities still play an important role, both in the genesis of political actors (their subjectivity) and in what they consider appropriate goals and strategies (in line with their framing and feeling rules). Based on our research into noise policies in Switzerland and the Netherlands, we show variation in people's responses to discursive opportunities (from consonance to dissonance to no response at all). This variation can be explained by a series of mechanisms: focusing, internalizing, converting, using the dominant discourse, and avoiding. This is not meant as an exhaustive list of mechanisms, but as the principle mediating ones we came across in our analysis of, on the one hand, the policy process regarding aircraft noise and the discursive opportunities provided and, on the other hand, the development of contentious actors and their various goals and strategies.

Admittedly, we have stretched the concept of opportunity here. But, a (policy) discourse presents opportunities much the same way as professional jargon (terminology, language) does. Professional jargon is able to illuminate certain aspects of the world, while neglecting others. Policy discourse, like any other, works much the same way. Fortunately, people can turn this disciplining effect into an object of contention itself.

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