Sleeping with the Enemy: Target Selection in Cooperative Private Politics

The past decade has witnessed an explosion in research at the intersection of markets and social movements (King and Pearce 2010), with an increasing acknowledgment of social movements as key drivers of institutional change in organizational fields. In mobilizing change in organizational fields, activist groups employ a wide array of tactics, ranging from more contentious (e.g. protests, lawsuits, sabotage) to more cooperative (e.g. cross-sector partnerships or alliances) (Baron, Neale, and Rao 2016; Soule and King 2008). Organizations comprising a social movement field are thus referred to variously by scholars as 'radicals' versus 'moderates' (Haines 1984) 'dark greens' versus 'light greens' in the environmental movement (Hoffman and Bertels 2010) or 'confrontational' versus 'cooperative' activists (Baron, Neale, and Rao 2016), depending on the tactics they employ. To date, most inquiries into social movement strategies for effecting change in organizational fields have focused on contentious private politics. Research in this stream suggests that contentious activists target large, visible, branded firms that have made prior commitments to social or environmental responsibility (Bartley and Child 2014; McDonnell, King, and Soule 2015) with the aim of winning concessions in the form of practice change.

Conversely, the strategies and target selection of cooperative activists are considerably less well understood. Studies of cooperative private politics have typically taken the form of rich cases studies of cross-sector social partnerships (CSSPs), emphasizing the challenges of relationships with two parties with different backgrounds and objective functions (i.e., firm and non-profit). While recent research suggests that target choice varies with the tactics activists employ (Eesley, DeCelles, and Lenox 2016), existing research says little about which firms cooperative activist target for collaboration. Moreover, the existing literature offers seemingly contradictory answers to this question. On the one hand, firms with high levels of prior contention, are those most likely to be motivated to collaborate with activists (McDonnell 2016), in order to forestall future contention. This perspective suggests that activists will collaborate with firms previously targeted by the contentious peers. On the other, symbolic interactionist movement scholars argue that activist groups actively work to fragment organizational fields into allies and adversaries which enable them to mobilize support and increase probability of success with adversaries (Hunt, Benford, and Snow 1994). This perspective would suggest keeping tactical "turfs" separate in respect of firm targets is optimal because it limits cooperative activists' undermining their contentious peers' efforts against adversaries, which can lead to criticisms from contentious peers.

Cooperative activists, like their contentious counterparts, carefully select collaboration partners; however, their decision criteria differs from their contentious peers in so far as they are seeking to create field-level change via their corporate partners as opposed to shaming corporate targets into action. Simultaneously, they have to consider risks of criticism or allegations of co-optation from peer activists. This logic suggests that cooperative activists are influenced by the prior pattern of contentious targeting which opens up some firms to collaboration, the structure of inter-firm linkages among potential targets which alters the likelihood of field-level change, and the structure of the movement field which influences the likelihood of peer criticism and their susceptibility to it. Therefore, I propose to resolve the seemingly contradictory answers offered by the existing social movements literature to the question of which firms activists collaborate with, by taking account of the dynamics and structure of the movement itself, the resources of the activist, and the broader organizational field in which contentiously targeted firms are embedded.

Specifically, I propose that while firms previously targeted contentiously offer good collaboration opportunities for activists, the ability of activists to collaborate with such firms is circumscribed in movements segregated along tactical lines where the cooperative activist faces a heighted risk of criticism from contentious activists, and enabled by the resources of the

cooperative activist. Further, drawing on the concepts of 'legitimacy spillovers' and 'reputation commons', I argue that following contentious targeting by activists, collaboration opportunities spread beyond the contentiously targeted firm to other firms in the industry, offering the activist considerable discretion in deciding which firms to collaborate with. Therefore, I propose that an activist's selection of collaboration targets is also driven by the prospects for effecting field-level change via the network position of the firm with which it collaborates, and the structure of the field in which the firm is embedded. Research has shown that practice innovations spread via networks, and practices adopted in response to movements diffuse (Briscoe and Safford 2008) yet research has not considered how firms' networks inform activist target choice (see Benton 2017 for one exception). This is likely to be a theoretically meaningful omission as activists are interested in effecting field-level change (i.e. practice diffusion), and the type of voluntary, evidence-based adoptions that activist-firm collaborations create are most contagious to other firms (Briscoe, Gupta, and Anner 2015).

I test my propositions in a hand-collected panel database that tracks all contentious and cooperative interactions, including formal collaborations, between 118 U.S.-based environmental social movement organizations (SMOs) and a random sample of 300 Fortune 500 companies between 1988 and 2012. From this database I identify firms and industries previously targeted by contentious tactics, as well as the tactical repertoires of SMOs which I combine with relational network data between SMOs to measure the level of segregation along tactical repertoires in a given movement. I collect data on SMO-firm collaborations - defined as 'organizations working together by committing resources to produce or create something' – from news and press release archives, and firms' financial filings, consistent with approaches used for research on firm-firm alliances (Schilling 2009). I supplement the above data with firm-level measures of receptivity to activist challenges, media attention, size, public approval and environmental performance, as well as financial and strategic data on the SMOs in my sample. I am currently in the process of completing data collection, but early descriptive analysis based on a sample of 80 firms for whom coding has been completed offers preliminary support for hypotheses for which variables are collected. In estimating the effects of my hypothesized drivers of activists collaborating with firms I use a conditional logit analysis. Conditional logistic regressions model choice behavior when an actor, in my case an SMO, chooses among a discrete set of alternatives (Greve, 2000; Kalnins and Chung, 2004), or firms, and allows me to control for time-invariant unobserved heterogeneity between SMOs that might drive their selection of firms.

This paper contributes to several streams of research. First, it offers a dynamic structural perspective on cooperative private politics, a heretofore understudied phenomenon in the literature on social movements and markets. Contrary to existing research on target selection in contentious private politics which focuses on firm characteristics exogenous to the movement, I propose that target selection in cooperative private politics is driven by the dynamics and structure of the social movement itself as well as the opportunities for practice diffusion that a firm's inter-organizational networks offer. To research on cross-sector partnerships, I highlight the embeddedness of these relationships in a broader movement field composed of heterogeneous activist preferences and strategies, which can be enable or constrain the agency of cooperative activists. Finally, this research complements a growing stream of research that views firms' external environments as interconnected webs of stakeholders (Dorobantu, Henisz, and Nartey 2016; Rowley 1997), where firms' collaborative engagement of one stakeholder produces positive spillovers to others (Dorobantu, Henisz, and Nartey 2015; Werner 2015), and poor performance in one domain can have negative implications for its relations in others (McDonnell and Werner 2016). I add to this growing research the possibility that negative relations with a sub-set of stakeholders can give rise to subsequent positive relations.

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