



Struggle as Field: Internal Power, Legitimacy Capture, and the Politics of Collective Action

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Abstract

Political struggles are commonly analysed as unified projects of collective action oriented towards external adversaries. This assumption obscures a central political fact: struggles themselves operate as fields of power. This article advances Internal Contestation Theory to explain how collective struggles generate internal hierarchies, exclusions, and authority long before any external victory or institutional transition occurs. Rather than treating internal conflict as fragmentation or organisational failure, the theory conceptualises struggle as a political field in which actors compete to capture legitimacy, control resources, regulate voice, and pre-authorise future authority. I argue that internal contestation unfolds through a sequenced process of legitimacy capture, gatekeeping, voice regulation, resource conversion, and anticipatory rule consolidation. These mechanisms transform collective action into structured hierarchies that shape representation, decision-making, and political outcomes both during and after periods of mobilisation. The article adopts a conceptual theory-building methodology, synthesising insights from political sociology, contentious politics, institutionalism, and legitimacy theory to develop a generalisable analytical framework that relies on no case-specific evidence. The contribution is threefold. First, it reconceptualises struggle as a field of internal power rather than moral unity. Second, it offers a portable model for analysing legitimacy capture within collective action. Third, it reframes debates on representation and democratic futures by demonstrating how internal power dynamics prefigure post-struggle governance.

Keywords

Collective action; Internal contestation; Legitimacy capture; Political fields; Power and authority; Representation

1. Introduction

Political struggles are routinely narrated as moments of unity. Across political science and adjacent fields, collective struggles are commonly analysed as coherent projects of collective action oriented towards an external adversary, whether the state, a regime, or an established order. In this framing, unity is assumed rather than interrogated, and internal disagreement is typically treated as temporary, pathological, or analytically secondary. However, this way of understanding struggle obscures a central political fact: struggles themselves operate as fields of power. They do not merely confront power; they generate it internally.

Within the study of collective action and contentious politics, analytical attention has historically prioritised mobilisation, framing, opportunity structures, and outcomes (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001; Tarrow, 2011). Internal dynamics are acknowledged, but often only at the margins, where they appear as coordination problems, leadership disputes, or organisational breakdowns. Even when internal divisions are recognised, they are rarely treated as structured political processes. Instead, they are framed as noise that distracts from the principal antagonism or as failures that undermine collective efficacy. This tendency has encouraged political science to model struggles as unified actors, despite empirical observations across contexts repeatedly suggesting otherwise.

This gap generates a fundamental puzzle. If struggles are genuinely collective projects defined by shared purpose, why do they so consistently produce internal hierarchies, exclusions, and asymmetries of authority? Why do some actors acquire the capacity to speak for “the struggle” while others are marginalised, disciplined, or rendered peripheral? Moreover, why do these internal power relations often persist beyond moments of mobilisation, shaping representation and authority long after struggles formally succeed or dissolve? Existing theoretical approaches offer partial insights but stop short of treating internal power as a constitutive feature of struggle itself.

One reason for this omission lies in the normative status often afforded to struggles. Particularly where struggles are associated with justice, emancipation, or resistance, they are frequently approached as moral projects rather than political fields. Internal contestation is therefore interpreted either as deviation from an assumed unity or as evidence of organisational dysfunction. While understandable, this orientation limits analytical reach. By positioning internal politics as failure rather than structure, it discourages systematic inquiry into how power is organised, accumulated, and exercised within collective projects.

This article advances a different approach. It argues that collective struggles should be analysed as political fields, structured by competition over scarce and consequential political goods. Drawing on political sociology, institutionalism, and legitimacy theory, the article develops Internal Contestation Theory (ICT) to explain how struggles generate internal power and exclusion through patterned mechanisms of authority formation. The analysis remains deliberately conceptual, advancing a general theoretical framework rather than empirical claims about any specific movement, context, or political organisation. The purpose is to clarify how power operates within struggle as a general political phenomenon, not to evaluate or diagnose particular cases.

The central research question guiding this analysis is therefore straightforward but underexplored: How do collective struggles generate internal power and exclusion? Addressing this question requires shifting analytical attention away from outcomes alone and towards the internal processes through which authority is constituted during struggle. It also requires moving beyond descriptive accounts of factionalism or leadership conflict to develop a generalisable framework capable of explaining why internal hierarchies emerge across diverse forms of collective action. The purpose is explanatory rather than diagnostic, and the argument should not be read as an assessment of, or commentary on, any identifiable political struggle.

Internal Contestation Theory provides such a framework. It conceptualises struggle as a field structured by competition over four scarce political goods: legitimacy, resources, voice, and future authority. ICT argues that internal contestation unfolds through a sequenced process in which actors accumulate symbolic centrality, establish gatekeeping practices, regulate repre-

sentation, convert legitimacy into organisational advantage, and consolidate expectations of future rule. Through this process, collective action is transformed into a structured hierarchy, often well before any external victory or institutional transition occurs. Importantly, ICT treats internal power not as moral failure or organisational pathology, but as a normal political outcome of collective mobilisation under conditions of scarcity and uncertainty.

The contribution of this article is threefold. First, it reconceptualises struggle as a site of internal power production rather than a temporary suspension of politics. This challenges prevailing assumptions in the study of collective action that treat unity as the analytical baseline and internal contestation as secondary. Second, it offers a portable conceptual framework for analysing legitimacy capture and authority formation across diverse ideological, organisational, and regional contexts, maintaining sufficient abstraction to ensure broad applicability while preserving analytical precision. Third, the article reframes debates on representation and democratic futures by showing how internal power dynamics prefigure post-struggle governance. Authority exercised during a struggle frequently becomes authority exercised after a struggle, with enduring implications for inclusion, accountability, and political continuity.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews existing theoretical approaches to collective action, factionalism, and internal conflict, and demonstrates why they fail to fully account for how internal power is produced within struggles. Section three develops Internal Contestation Theory in detail, specifying its core concepts, assumptions, and mechanisms. Section four outlines the conceptual theory-building methodology adopted in the article. Section five introduces a typology of intra-struggle power regimes, illustrating how different configurations of internal contestation generate distinct authority structures. The final section discusses the implications of the theory for political science debates on representation, legitimacy, and democratic futures, and concludes by reaffirming the importance of analysing power in struggle.

2. What Existing Theories Explain, and What They Miss

Political science has produced rich literature on collective action, mobilisation, and political contention. However, these bodies of work remain unevenly equipped to explain how power is organised and exercised within struggles themselves. Across dominant theoretical traditions, internal dynamics are typically acknowledged but analytically subordinated, treated as contingent disturbances rather than constitutive mechanisms. This section argues that existing approaches explain why collective action emerges and how it confronts external targets. However, they consistently under-theorise how authority, hierarchy, and exclusion are produced internally during struggle.

Social movement theory provides the most developed account of collective mobilisation, particularly through frameworks centred on political opportunity structures, framing processes, and repertoires of contention (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001; Tarrow, 2011). Recent work has refined these approaches by incorporating culture, emotion, and identity, offering a more nuanced understanding of mobilisation dynamics (Jasper, 2018; Polletta & Jasper, 2021). However, even in these updated formulations, internal power relations are rarely treated as a central object of analysis. Leadership, coordination, and organisational structure are often discussed instrumentally, as means to mobilise resources or sustain participation, rather than as arenas in which authority is contested and consolidated. As a result, internal hierarchies tend to appear either as functional necessities or as deviations from an assumed collective unity. The implicit analytical move is to treat struggles as actors with internal coherence, rather than

as fields structured by competition over voice, legitimacy, and representation.

Where social movement scholarship does engage internal conflict, it frequently does so through the language of factionalism or elite rivalry. These accounts, which have gained renewed attention in recent years, emphasise leadership disputes, strategic disagreements, and organisational splits as drivers of movement decline or failure (Higley & Burton, 2006; Kalyvas, 2006). While such work usefully highlights the role of agency and contingency, it remains primarily descriptive. Factionalism is framed as episodic and context-specific, often explained retrospectively once mobilisation falters. What is missing is a general theory of why internal contestation emerges so predictably across collective struggles, and how it becomes stabilised into enduring hierarchies rather than remaining fluid disagreement. By treating internal conflict as a breakdown, factionalism obscures the possibility that internal rivalry may be a systematic mechanism for producing authority during struggle.

Principal–agent and collective action theories offer a different lens, focusing on coordination problems, free-riding, and delegation within groups. Recent contributions in this tradition continue to emphasise monitoring, incentives, and information asymmetries as central challenges of collective action (Bendor, Diermeier, Siegel, & Ting, 2011; Gehlbach, Sonin, & Svolik, 2016). These approaches are analytically powerful for explaining why collective projects require leadership and organisational structure. However, they tend to conceptualise authority as a functional solution to coordination problems rather than as a contested political outcome. Internal hierarchy appears as an efficiency-enhancing response to collective dilemmas, not as a process shaped by competition over legitimacy, representation, and future authority. Therefore, principal–agent models struggle to explain why some actors acquire disproportionate voice and symbolic centrality even when such concentration undermines collective efficiency or participation. While the preceding approaches explain mobilisation and coordination, institutionalist scholarship comes closer to the problem by examining how authority hardens over time.

Institutionalist approaches, particularly those attentive to path dependence and rule formation, deepen this insight by recognising that early organisational choices can harden into durable structures (Mahoney & Thelen, 2015; Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). Recent institutionalist scholarship has extended this insight to informal institutions and organisational norms, showing how practices established under conditions of uncertainty can persist long after their original rationale fades (Helmke & Levitsky, 2006). However, even here, the analytical focus tends to fall on how institutions constrain actors after consolidation, rather than on how authority is pre-authorised within struggles before formal institutions emerge. Institutionalism explains stability well, but it often treats the origins of authority as exogenous or accidental, leaving unexplored the internal political processes through which certain actors come to define rules, boundaries, and representation during mobilisation.

Across these literatures, a standard limitation emerges. Internal contestation is consistently framed as a problem to be managed, a deviation from unity, or a symptom of organisational weakness. Opposition, dissent, or rivalry within struggles is interpreted as noise that interrupts collective action rather than as a mechanism that constitutes it. This framing has important analytical consequences. By treating internal politics as a breakdown, existing theories overlook how struggles actively produce hierarchies through competition over legitimacy, resources, and voice. They also obscure how authority exercised during struggle can prefigure authority exercised after struggle, shaping representation and governance beyond moments of mobilisation.

The gap this article addresses lies precisely here. What is missing is a generalisable theory that treats internal contestation not as failure, but as a standard and politically productive process. Internal Contestation Theory builds on, but departs from, existing approaches by conceptualising struggle as a political field structured by competition over scarce political goods. In doing so, it shifts the analytical focus from whether struggles remain unified to how internal authority is generated, stabilised, and normalised. This move allows political science to treat internal opposition, hierarchy, and exclusion not as anomalies to be explained away, but as mechanisms through which collective struggles produce durable political outcomes.

3. Internal Contestation Theory: Concepts, Assumptions, and Mechanisms

Internal Contestation Theory (ICT) advances a conceptual reorientation in the analysis of collective struggles. Rather than treating struggle as a temporarily unified actor confronting an external adversary, ICT conceptualises it as a political field in which power is produced, accumulated, and stabilised through internal competition. This move builds on field-analytic approaches in political sociology, which emphasise relationality, positional struggle, and the distribution of power within bounded arenas (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012; Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008). Applied to collective struggle, the field perspective foregrounds the internal organisation of authority, legitimacy, and voice, shifting attention away from unity as an assumption and towards power as an endogenous outcome. To clarify the core concepts and mechanisms advanced in this article, Box 1 summarises Internal Contestation Theory and its central analytical claims.

Box 1. Internal Contestation Theory (ICT)

Internal Contestation Theory conceptualises collective struggle as a political field in which power is produced internally rather than merely directed outward. It argues that actors within a struggle compete over four scarce political goods: legitimacy, resources, voice, and future authority. Through a sequenced process of legitimacy accumulation, boundary control, voice regulation, resource conversion, and anticipatory rule-making, internal hierarchies are stabilised. Rather than treating internal conflict as a breakdown or failure, ICT reframes internal contestation as a standard mechanism through which authority, representation, and exclusion are generated within collective action.

Internal Contestation Theory shares important intellectual affinities with field-theoretic approaches in political sociology, particularly in its understanding of struggle as a relational arena structured by positional competition. Field theory usefully explains how actors occupy unequal positions within bounded social spaces and compete over forms of capital, recognition, and influence. However, while field theory captures positional struggle effectively, it does not specify the internal political process through which legitimacy is converted into authority within collective struggle. In particular, it offers a limited explanation of how some actors acquire the recognised capacity to speak for the struggle while others become marginalised. Strategic Action Field Theory, developed by Fligstein and McAdam (2012), advances this discussion by explaining how fields achieve stability through strategic interaction, incumbency, and social skill. It clarifies how actors maintain order and negotiate power within fields. However, it does not identify legitimacy capture as a sequenced mechanism through which internal hierarchy is progressively stabilised during collective mobilisation. As a result, the transition from symbolic recognition to durable authority remains under-specified.

Similarly, Robert Michels's (1962) theory of oligarchy provides a powerful account of why

organisations tend towards concentrated leadership. However, Michels primarily explains oligarchic outcomes rather than the earlier political processes through which authority emerges before oligarchy becomes visible. His framework tells us why hierarchy persists, but less about how hierarchy is initially produced within fluid and contested struggles. ICT contributes precisely to this analytical gap. It offers a mechanism-based explanation linking legitimacy accumulation, gatekeeping, voice regulation, resource conversion, and anticipatory authority. Rather than simply showing that hierarchy emerges, ICT explains the political sequence through which hierarchy is produced, stabilised, and normalised inside collective struggle. ICT, therefore, shifts attention from the existence of hierarchy to the political mechanisms through which hierarchy is produced within collective struggle. Having clarified ICT's theoretical distinctiveness, the next step is to specify the assumptions and mechanisms through which internal contestation generates authority.

The “struggle-as-field” move rests on a simple but consequential premise: collective mobilisation does not suspend politics. Instead, it intensifies it. Struggles assemble heterogeneous actors under conditions of urgency, scarcity, and uncertainty, creating incentives for competition over symbolic centrality, organisational control, and future authority. ICT therefore rejects the notion that internal hierarchy is merely an accidental by-product of mobilisation or a sign of organisational failure. It treats internal contestation as a normal political process through which struggles generate order, exclusion, and authority.

At the core of ICT is the claim that internal power within struggle is structured by competition over four scarce political goods: legitimacy, resources, voice, and future authority. These goods are analytically distinct but empirically interdependent. Legitimacy refers to recognised moral or symbolic authority to represent the struggle, define its meaning, and speak in its name. Unlike formal leadership positions, legitimacy operates relationally and is often grounded in narratives of authenticity, sacrifice, or proximity to foundational moments (Haack, Schilke & Zucker, 2021). Resources encompass material, organisational, and informational assets that enable sustained mobilisation, coordination, and survival over time. Control over resources not only facilitates action but also produces dependence, reinforcing asymmetries within the struggle. Voice denotes the capacity to articulate positions, set agendas, and delimit acceptable discourse. It is exercised through both formal representation and informal practices of inclusion, silencing, and discipline.

Future authority refers to anticipatory claims about who is entitled to govern, decide, or lead once mobilisation yields institutional outcomes. This temporal dimension is critical because struggles are often oriented not only towards present resistance but also towards imagined futures of rule, recognition, or governance. Table 1 abstracts the key manifestations of legitimacy accumulation within collective struggle, illustrating how symbolic authority is progressively stabilised into internal political order.

Table 1. Manifestations of legitimacy accumulation in collective struggle

Phase of legitimacy accumulation	Core logic	Typical manifestations (conceptual)	Political effect
Symbolic centrality formation	Actors establish proximity to the meaning of the struggle	Claims to moral authority, historical primacy, sacrifice, or authenticity	Differentiates central from peripheral actors
Boundary recognition	Legitimacy enables control over inclusion	Defining who belongs, who may speak, and which practices are admissible	Narrows the field of legitimate participation

Representational consolidation	Legitimate actors claim to speak for the struggle	Appointment of spokespersons, agenda-setting authority, and discursive dominance	Aligns voice with recognised authority
Organisational anchoring	Symbolic legitimacy is converted into structure.	Control over coordination mechanisms, procedural authority, or internal rules	Stabilises authority beyond momentary recognition
Anticipatory authorisation	Present legitimacy projects future entitlement.	Naturalisation of leadership claims, expectations of future decision rights	Pre-figures post-struggle authority

ICT argues that internal contestation unfolds through a sequenced process in which these goods are accumulated and converted into a durable hierarchy. The first moment in this sequence is legitimacy accumulation, where actors seek to establish symbolic centrality within the struggle. This involves claims to authenticity, historical primacy, moral authority, or representational entitlement. Recent scholarship on political legitimacy underscores that such claims are performative and relational, requiring recognition by relevant audiences rather than formal validation (Chenoweth, 2020; Gerschewski, 2013). Within struggle, legitimacy accumulation differentiates central actors from peripheral ones, laying the groundwork for subsequent asymmetries. The second moment involves gatekeeping and boundary control. As legitimacy becomes unevenly distributed, actors with recognised authority acquire the capacity to define who belongs, whose claims are admissible, and which practices are acceptable. Boundary work has been widely theorised in organisational and political sociology as a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). However, ICT highlights its specific role within the struggle as a means of stabilising internal power. Gatekeeping transforms symbolic authority into practical control over participation and recognition.

The third moment is voice regulation. Here, internal authority is exercised through the management of representation, agenda-setting, and discourse. Actors occupying dominant positions regulate who speaks for the struggle, how dissent is framed, and which narratives are amplified or marginalised. Contemporary work on representation emphasises that voice is not merely expressive but constitutive of political reality, shaping whose interests are recognised and whose are rendered invisible (Saward, 2010; Disch, 2021). Within struggle, voice regulation consolidates hierarchy by aligning representation with dominant legitimacy claims. The fourth moment entails resource conversion. Legitimacy and voice are translated into preferential access to material, organisational, and informational resources. This conversion deepens asymmetry by enabling dominant actors to institutionalise their position through organisational infrastructure, staffing, and control over communication channels. Resource conversion also produces dependency, as peripheral actors become reliant on central nodes for access and survival. Recent institutionalist scholarship highlights how such asymmetries, once established, tend to reproduce themselves through feedback effects (Mahoney & Thelen, 2015; Capoccia, 2016).

The final moment is the pre-authorisation of the rule. Internal hierarchies formed during struggle become normalised expectations about future authority. Certain actors are widely regarded as the natural leaders, representatives, or decision-makers in post-mobilisation contexts, even in the absence of formal selection. This anticipatory consolidation of authority is central to ICT, as it explains how power exercised during struggle often carries forward into subsequent institutional arrangements. Authority is not merely claimed after victory; it is rehearsed and legitimised in advance.

ICT differs in important respects from existing approaches to internal dynamics. Unlike factionalism theories, it does not treat internal rivalry as episodic conflict driven by personality or contingency. Instead, it conceptualises contestation as structured competition over identifiable political goods. Unlike accounts of movement fragmentation, which focus on breakdown and decline, ICT explains how internal hierarchy can coexist with, and even facilitate, sustained mobilisation. In contrast to elite split models, which typically assume pre-existing elites competing within established institutions, ICT theorises elite formation itself as an outcome of struggle. Finally, ICT should not be conflated with theories of authoritarian drift. It does not assume coercion, repression, or intentional domination. Internal hierarchy may emerge through consensual recognition, routinised practices, and symbolic authority, without overt force.

The explanatory power of ICT is subject to clear scope conditions. The theory is strongest in contexts characterised by high symbolic stakes, prolonged mobilisation, and uncertainty about future institutional outcomes. Under such conditions, competition over legitimacy and future authority intensifies, and early asymmetries are more likely to harden into durable hierarchies. ICT is weaker in settings where mobilisation is short-lived, authority is externally imposed, or institutional frameworks strictly regulate internal decision-making. It is also less applicable where collective action is highly decentralised and deliberately resists representation, though even in such cases, informal hierarchies may still emerge. ICT does not claim to explain all forms of internal conflict, nor does it deny the possibility of egalitarian or pluralist struggle. Its contribution lies in identifying a general mechanism through which internal power is produced, not in asserting that hierarchy is inevitable or normatively desirable. The theory also does not specify the normative consequences of internal hierarchy, which may vary across contexts and values. Instead, it provides an analytical framework for understanding how struggles generate authority and exclusion as political outcomes.

By conceptualising struggle as a field of internal contestation, ICT offers a systematic account of how power operates inside collective action. It complements existing theories by shifting the analytical focus from unity and breakdown to authority and mechanism. In doing so, it provides political science with a vocabulary for analysing internal power dynamics that shape both mobilisation and its aftermath, without reliance on case-specific evidence or context-bound explanation.

4. Methodology

This article adopts a conceptual theory-building methodology grounded in qualitative analysis of extant scholarly literature. The methodological objective is to develop a generalisable analytical framework capable of explaining how internal power operates within collective struggles. Conceptual theory-building is particularly appropriate where existing literatures exhibit fragmentation, conceptual slippage, or unresolved analytical gaps, and where the aim is to synthesise insights across traditions into a coherent explanatory model (Goertz, 2020; Swedberg, 2014).

The domain of analysis is defined broadly as collective struggles, understood as organised or semi-organised projects of collective mobilisation oriented towards political, social, or institutional transformation. This definition deliberately avoids restricting the analysis to any specific ideological orientation, organisational form, or historical period. By construing struggle at a high level of abstraction, the article seeks to identify recurrent internal power dynamics across contexts without relying on case-specific evidence. The analysis, therefore, treats struggles

as analytical objects rather than empirical cases, consistent with the argument's conceptual scope. The theoretical framework was developed through a systematic qualitative engagement with extant literature across political science, political sociology, and related fields. Literature was identified using a structured search strategy across major academic databases, including Web of Science, Scopus, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. Search terms included combinations of "collective action," "social movements," "internal conflict," "legitimacy," "representation," "political authority," "institutionalisation," and "power." The initial search returned approximately 420 scholarly texts, including journal articles, monographs, and review essays published primarily between 2000 and 2024, with a preference for work from the past five years where possible.

Inclusion criteria prioritised peer-reviewed sources that engaged directly with questions of authority, legitimacy, organisation, or internal dynamics within collective political projects. Foundational theoretical works were retained, where they continue to structure contemporary debate. Exclusion criteria eliminated purely descriptive case studies, movement-specific ethnographies, activist writings, and policy-oriented reports that did not contribute to generalisable theoretical insight. Following iterative screening and thematic coding, approximately 95 texts were retained for close analytical engagement. These texts informed the development, refinement, and differentiation of the core concepts advanced in the article. Analytically, the study employs two complementary strategies. The first is conceptual synthesis, which involves integrating insights from distinct literatures into a unified theoretical framework. This strategy enables the identification of shared mechanisms that are obscured when bodies of scholarship are treated in isolation (Gerring, 2012). The second strategy is mechanism-oriented analysis at the conceptual level. Rather than tracing empirical sequences within specific cases, the article specifies ideal-typical mechanisms through which internal contestation produces hierarchy, authority, and exclusion within struggle. This approach aligns with recent work emphasising the value of mechanism-based explanation in theory development, particularly where empirical variation is high, and outcomes are contingent (Beach & Pedersen, 2019).

The typologies developed in the subsequent section follow an analytic differentiation logic, distinguishing patterns of internal power based on how legitimacy, resources, voice, and future authority are configured. Typologies are used not as classificatory endpoints but as heuristic tools that facilitate comparison and cumulative theorising. They are intended to be portable across contexts and open to empirical testing in future research. Several limitations follow from this methodological choice. The article does not offer empirical validation of the proposed theory, nor does it adjudicate between competing explanations using case evidence. Its claims to generalisability are therefore theoretical rather than statistical. This limitation is deliberate and appropriate given the theory-building objective. By clearly delimiting scope and method, the article provides a foundation for subsequent empirical work while maintaining analytical clarity and conceptual precision.

5. A Typology of Intra-Struggle Power Regimes

If struggles are understood as political fields structured by internal contestation, then variation in how power is organised within them becomes analytically central. Internal Contestation Theory, therefore, requires not only a general mechanism but also a typology capable of distinguishing recurring configurations of authority, legitimacy, and exclusion. This section develops a typology of intra-struggle power regimes, understood as relatively stable patterns through which legitimacy, resources, voice, and future authority are distributed and governed within collective struggles. The typology is not intended as a classificatory endpoint, but rath-

er as a heuristic framework that enables comparison, diagnosis, and cumulative theorising across contexts.

The four intra-struggle power regimes are distinguished along four analytical dimensions: the concentration of legitimacy, the distribution of voice, the degree of boundary control, and the extent to which future authority is centralised. These dimensions capture how internal power is organised, exercised, and stabilised within collective struggle. Legitimacy concentration refers to whether symbolic authority is widely dispersed or concentrated among a limited set of actors. The distribution of voice concerns the extent to which participation in representation and agenda-setting remains broad or restricted. Boundary control reflects how open or tightly regulated the field of legitimate participation becomes. Future authority refers to the degree to which claims to post-struggle leadership are diffuse, contested, or already centralised. Different combinations of these dimensions generate distinct configurations of internal power. Table 2 presents a taxonomy of the dimensions generated.

Table 2. Analytical dimensions of intra-struggle power regimes

Regime	Legitimacy	Voice	Boundary Control	Future Authority
<i>Pluralist Field</i>	Diffuse	Broad	Open	Contested
<i>Oligarchic Field</i>	Concentrated	Restricted	Moderate	Centralised
<i>Charismatic Monopoly</i>	Highly Concentrated	Leader-Centred	Strong	Personalised
<i>Security-Guarded Field</i>	Conformity-Based	Controlled	Very Strong	Discipline-Based
<i>Source: Author's conceptualisation</i>				

The first type is the *Pluralist Field*. In this configuration, legitimacy is diffuse and contested, voice is broadly distributed, and boundaries of participation remain relatively open. Authority is provisional rather than settled, and no single actor or group can monopolise symbolic centrality. Decision-making tends to be decentralised, often relying on deliberative practices, rotating leadership, or informal consensus. Recent scholarship on horizontalism and participatory governance highlights the appeal of such arrangements, particularly in early phases of mobilisation, where inclusivity and openness are seen as sources of legitimacy (Gerbaudo, 2017; Maeckelbergh, 2022). The *Pluralist Field* produces high levels of participation and discursive diversity, but it also generates vulnerability. Because legitimacy is weakly consolidated, coordination costs are high, and the field remains susceptible to internal capture as struggles intensify or endure.

The *Pluralist Field* often transitions into other regimes under pressure from scale, duration, and external engagement. As mobilisation expands or becomes prolonged, demands for coordination, representation, and strategic coherence increase. Under such conditions, actors who can convert symbolic recognition into organisational capacity may begin to stabilise authority, setting the stage for more hierarchical configurations. The transition is rarely abrupt. It occurs through incremental practices of agenda-setting, spokesperson selection, and resource concentration that gradually narrow the field of effective participation.

The second type is the *Oligarchic Field*, characterised by the concentration of voice and resources in the hands of a limited group of actors. Legitimacy remains nominally collective, but a core leadership or organisational centre exercises practical authority. This configuration resonates with long-standing insights in political sociology regarding the tendency of organisations to generate oligarchic structures, even where egalitarian ideals prevail (Michels,

1911/1962; Leach, 2005). In the context of struggle, oligarchic consolidation often emerges as a response to coordination challenges, external negotiation, or resource dependency. Central actors justify authority on the grounds of efficiency, expertise, or strategic necessity.

The *Oligarchic Field* produces stability and strategic capacity, enabling sustained mobilisation and coherent engagement with external actors. However, it also narrows internal accountability and reduces the permeability of boundaries. Peripheral actors retain formal inclusion but experience declining influence over decision-making and representation. Over time, oligarchic consolidation may harden into a durable hierarchy, particularly where leadership positions become routinised and insulated from challenge. Transition out of this regime typically occurs either through internal contestation, where excluded actors mobilise alternative legitimacy claims, or through further concentration of authority, leading to more monopolistic configurations.

The third type is the *Charismatic Monopoly*. In this regime, legitimacy is highly concentrated around a figure or tightly bound inner circle that embodies the symbolic meaning of the struggle. Authority flows less from organisational procedures than from personal recognition, affective attachment, or claims of exceptional commitment. Contemporary work on charisma emphasises its relational and performative dimensions, highlighting how recognition by followers sustains authority even in the absence of formal structures (Joosse, 2014; Weber, 1978). Within struggle, *charismatic monopoly* simplifies representation by collapsing the distinction between the individual and the collective.

Charismatic monopoly produces strong internal cohesion and clear lines of authority, often enhancing mobilisation capacity and narrative coherence. At the same time, it generates acute dynamics of exclusion. Alternative voices are easily framed as disloyal, divisive, or illegitimate, and internal contestation becomes personalised rather than procedural. The durability of this regime is contingent on the maintenance of charismatic recognition. Transitions occur when charisma erodes, when organisational demands exceed personal capacity, or when inner-circle actors convert symbolic authority into institutional control, producing either oligarchic stabilisation or fragmentation.

The fourth type is the *Security-Guarded Field*, defined by intensive boundary policing and the prioritisation of internal discipline over pluralism. In this configuration, legitimacy is tightly coupled to conformity, and voice is regulated through explicit or implicit enforcement mechanisms. Authority is justified by reference to threats, vulnerabilities, or the need for protection, with internal dissent framed as a risk rather than as a difference. Recent scholarship on securitisation and organisational closure demonstrates how perceived threats can reconfigure internal power relations by legitimising extraordinary measures of control (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998; Léonard & Kaunert, 2020). Applied to struggle, this logic produces a field in which boundary maintenance becomes the primary mode of governance.

The *Security-Guarded Field* generates high levels of internal discipline and cohesion, often at the expense of deliberation and adaptability. Participation is narrowed, and legitimacy becomes conditional on adherence to prescribed norms. This regime is exceptionally durable once established, as boundary policing reproduces itself through cycles of suspicion and reinforcement. Transitions out of security-guarded configurations are rare and typically require either a reduction in perceived threat or a rupture that undermines the authority of those enforcing boundaries. In some cases, security-guarded regimes evolve into oligarchic or charismatic forms as enforcement authority becomes institutionalised or personalised.

These four regimes should not be understood as discrete or mutually exclusive categories. Instead, they represent ideal-typical configurations that capture dominant tendencies within struggles at particular moments. Hybrid forms are common, and transitions between regimes are often gradual rather than abrupt. Crucially, the typology highlights that internal power regimes are not merely reflections of external pressure or ideological orientation. They are produced through internal contestation over legitimacy, resources, voice, and future authority, and they shape the political trajectories of struggles irrespective of external outcomes.

By offering a typology of intra-struggle power regimes, Internal Contestation Theory provides scholars with an analytical tool that travels across contexts while remaining sensitive to variation. The typology invites comparative application, encourages attention to internal mechanisms rather than outcomes alone, and facilitates dialogue between political sociology, movement studies, and institutional analysis. Most importantly, it reframes internal hierarchy not as an aberration to be explained away, but as a patterned political outcome that warrants systematic analysis. These regime variations suggest that internal contestation is not merely descriptive variation within struggle but carries broader implications for representation, legitimacy, and governance.

6. Discussion and Implications

Internal Contestation Theory reorients how political science should think about collective struggle by shifting analytical attention from mobilisation outcomes to the production of authority within mobilisation itself. The preceding sections have demonstrated that struggles operate as political fields structured by competition over legitimacy, resources, voice, and future authority. The implications of this move extend well beyond the study of collective action. They speak directly to foundational debates on representation, legitimacy, and democratic futures, challenging several assumptions that continue to shape mainstream political analysis.

First, ICT requires a rethinking of political representation. Conventional approaches tend to assume that representation emerges once collective action crystallises into formal organisation or institutional participation. In this view, the question of “who speaks for whom” is treated as a derivative of organisational design or electoral procedures. ICT suggests, instead, that representation is actively produced within struggle, often long before formalisation. Actors who successfully accumulate legitimacy and regulate voice during mobilisation come to define not only the meaning of the struggle but also its authorised representatives. Recent work on representation as a performative and contested process reinforces this insight, emphasising that representative claims precede and shape institutional recognition (Disch, 2021; Saward, 2010). From this perspective, struggles do not simply generate demands that later require representation. They generate representatives through internal power dynamics that rarely undergo democratic scrutiny.

Second, ICT reframes political legitimacy as a process that travels across arenas. Much of the legitimacy literature distinguishes between internal legitimacy, grounded in recognition by participants, and external legitimacy, conferred by institutions, publics, or legal authority (Gerschewski, 2013; Levi, Sacks, & Tyler, 2009). ICT shows that this distinction is analytically porous. Legitimacy accumulated within struggle frequently becomes the basis for external authority, as internal recognition is converted into representational standing, organisational control, or claims to future rule. This conversion helps explain why certain actors emerge from mobilisation with disproportionate authority, even in the absence of formal selection mechanisms. Legitimacy is not reset at the point of institutional transition; it is carried forward, often

naturalised as deserved leadership or inevitable authority.

Third, the theory invites a reconsideration of political transitions. Transitions are commonly analysed as moments in which struggles give way to governance, implying a shift from contentious politics to institutional rule. ICT challenges this temporal framing. Internal contestation does not end with victory, settlement, or institutionalisation. It is formalised. Power relations forged during struggle become embedded in organisational hierarchies, representative claims, and decision-making structures that persist into post-mobilisation contexts. Recent scholarship on political continuity and institutional reproduction underscores how early power asymmetries shape long-term outcomes, even when formal rules change (Slater & Wong, 2022; Thelen, 2021). ICT adds to this literature by showing that these asymmetries are often generated before institutions emerge, within the struggle itself.

The implications for democratic futures are sobering but analytically clarifying. If internal authority formation during struggle prefigures post-struggle governance, then democratic deficits cannot be attributed solely to institutional design or post-transition failure. They may be rooted in the internal power regimes that govern mobilisation. This does not imply that hierarchy is inevitable or normatively undesirable in all forms. Instead, it suggests that the democratic quality of political outcomes is shaped, in part, by how legitimacy, voice, and authority are organised during struggle. Democratic theory, which has traditionally focused on institutions, procedures, and participation after mobilisation, must therefore pay greater attention to the internal politics of collective action.

The ICT opens a new research agenda for political science. Rather than asking only whether struggles succeed or fail, scholars should examine how internal power is distributed and stabilised over time. This involves tracing who accumulates legitimacy, how boundaries of participation are drawn, whose voices are amplified or marginalised, and how anticipatory claims to future authority are normalised. Such questions are amenable to qualitative, comparative, and mixed-methods research, but they require conceptual clarity about what is being observed. By providing a generalisable framework for analysing internal contestation, ICT offers a foundation for cumulative inquiry across subfields, from political sociology and movement studies to democratic theory and institutional analysis. These implications underscore a central claim of the article: understanding politics beyond struggle requires understanding power within struggle. Collective mobilisation is not a pre-political space of unity, but a formative arena in which authority, exclusion, and representation are actively produced. Recognising this does not diminish the significance of struggle. It clarifies its political consequences.

Beyond its immediate explanatory value, Internal Contestation Theory contributes to several broader fields of political inquiry. Within political sociology, ICT advances the analysis of power by showing how authority is produced relationally within collective struggle rather than merely exercised through formal institutions. In collective action theory, it challenges the tendency to treat mobilisation as a unified actor by demonstrating that internal hierarchy and exclusion are often constitutive of collective action itself. For democratic theory, ICT highlights that democratic deficits may emerge long before institutional consolidation, rooted in the internal distribution of legitimacy, voice, and representation during mobilisation. In institutional analysis, the theory extends understanding of institutional emergence by showing how future authority is often pre-authorised within struggle before formal rules or structures crystallise. Collectively, these contributions position ICT as a portable framework for analysing how internal power dynamics shape not only struggles themselves, but also the political orders that emerge from them.

7. Conclusion

This article argues that collective struggle should not be understood as a temporary suspension of politics and power, but rather as a formative arena in which authority, hierarchy, and exclusion are actively produced. By advancing Internal Contestation Theory, the analysis reconceptualised struggle as a political field structured by competition over legitimacy, resources, voice, and future authority. Rather than treating internal conflict as fragmentation, failure, or organisational pathology, the article demonstrates that internal contestation is a standard and politically productive process through which struggles generate durable power relations long before any external victory or institutional transition.

The core contribution of ICT lies in its capacity to explain how internal authority is accumulated, stabilised, and normalised during mobilisation. By specifying the mechanisms of legitimacy accumulation, gatekeeping, voice regulation, resource conversion, and the pre-authorisation of rule, the theory provides political science with a generalisable framework for analysing power within collective action. This framework bridges gaps between social movement theory, political sociology, institutionalism, and democratic theory, offering a shared vocabulary for examining how struggles shape political outcomes beyond their immediate objectives.

The normative implications of this argument are consequential but not accusatory. If authority exercised during a struggle often prefigures authority exercised after a struggle, then questions of inclusion, accountability, and representation cannot be deferred until formal institutions emerge. Internal openness, contestability, and reflexivity during mobilisation matter because they shape the distribution of power that follows. This does not imply that hierarchy is inherently illegitimate or that struggles must conform to idealised models of deliberation. It does, however, suggest that democratic futures are influenced by how legitimacy and voice are organised at the point of collective action. Treating struggle as a morally unified space risks obscuring these dynamics and limiting critical reflection.

The article, therefore, invites a modest but important reorientation in political analysis. Scholars are encouraged to look beyond whether struggles succeed or fail and to examine how internal power is constituted, who is authorised to represent collective projects, and how anticipatory claims to future authority are established. Doing so does not diminish the significance of struggle as a vehicle for political change. It clarifies its consequences. Struggle does not suspend power. It rearranges it. Recognising this is essential to understanding how collective action shapes political authority, representation, and democratic possibility long after mobilisation itself has passed.

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