Spirituality, Religion, and Progressive Social Movements: Resources and Motivation for Social Change

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Spirituality, Religion, and Progressive Social Movements: Resources and Motivation for Social Change

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Social movement theory and research has paid little attention to the role of spirituality and religion in social movement mobilization. This article reviews the existing literature on the role of spirituality and religion in progressive social movements, with emphasis on movements developed in the United States. The analysis is framed by three strains of contemporary theorizing about social movements: the political opportunities perspective, the mobilizing structures perspective, and the cultural framing perspectives. The article also examines recent suggestions that the emotional and spiritual dimensions are left out of these three perspectives. The analysis suggests that religious institutions provide rich resources for progressive movement mobilization, and that both religious and nonreligious spirituality can provide motivation for progressive movement involvement.

KEYWORDS social movements, spirituality, religion

In 1993, religious groups in Baltimore were seeing an increase in use of soup kitchens and food pantries by the working poor (Quigley, 2001; Tanner, 2002). They were angry that private companies involved in the city’s urban renewal projects were paying low wages in order to bid low to win contracts with the city. They took their concerns to Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD), a coalition of 50 Baltimore churches that had been advocating for services and subsidies for Baltimore’s poor residents since...
the 1980s (Snarr, 2007). BUILD decided to join forces with the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees and low-wage service workers to create a local campaign to develop a law that would require businesses with contracts with the city to pay their workers a “living wage,” a pay rate that would lift a family of four over the federal poverty level. At the time, the federal minimum wage was $4.25 an hour, a wage that could not lift a family out of poverty. The living wage law was enacted in July 1996, requiring city contractors with municipal contracts over $5,000 to pay a minimum wage of $6.16 an hour in 1996, with increments to reach $7.70 an hour in 1999. The law is estimated to have affected 1,500 to 2,000 workers (Quigley, 2001; Tanner, 2002).

The BUILD coalition had no intention of sparking a national social movement, but their success helped to trigger a nationwide alliance of religious and labor groups that has come to be known as the living wage movement. By December, 2010, 123 municipalities had living wage ordinances (National Employment Law Project, 2011). The policy solutions have varied from locality to locality, with some bolder than others, but all have established a wage above the federal minimum wage for some group of workers. The living wage movement has also helped to enact legislation at the state rather than local level. By 2011, 18 states plus the District of Columbia had enacted minimum wage laws that set the minimum wage higher than the federal requirement (Raise the Minimum Wage, 2011). In addition, the federal minimum wage in the United States was raised to $7.25 in July, 2009, but it is not clear that this legislation was influenced by the living wage movement (U.S. Department of Labor, 2009). By 2001, the movement had also crossed national lines into other countries, spreading to hospitals, finance houses, universities, art galleries, hotels, the garment industry, and the 2012 summer Olympics (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2009; Willis, 2011).

Although the role of spirituality and religion has received scant attention in academic analysis of social movements, the living wage movement is a recent example of the active involvement of religious groups in the mobilization of progressive social movements across time and around the globe. Recently, scholars in several disciplines have begun to examine the role of religion in social movements, but very little attention is being paid to the role of the broader construct of spirituality.

Social movements are ongoing, large-scale, collective efforts to bring about (or resist) social change. Della Porta and Diani (2006) identify the following properties that distinguish social movements from other social collectivities: They are involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents; they are linked by dense informal networks; and they share a distinct collective identity (p. 20). It is protest that distinguishes social movements from other types of social networks, but a single episode of
protest is not a social movement unless it is connected to a longer-lasting network of public action (della Porta & Diani, 2006; Tarrow, 2006).

The social movement literature makes a distinction between offensive social movements that seek to reform existing social arrangements and defensive social movements that seek to defend traditional values and social arrangements (Habermas, 1987; Ray, 1993). The popular media often refers to these two types of social movements as progressive and conservative. This article uses the language of progressive and defensive social movements. Both types of movements are common today across the world, and religious groups are involved in both. This paper focuses on the role of spirituality and religion in progressive social movements, with emphasis on movements developed in the United States. The analysis is framed by three strains of contemporary theorizing about social movements.

PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Early social science literature on social movements was based on a relatively unified perspective, commonly called strain theory. According to strain theory, social movements develop in response to some form of strain in society, when people’s efforts to cope with stress become collective effort (Hall, 1995; Marx & McAdam, 1994). More recent social science theory and research have been critical of social strain theory. Critics argue that strain is always present to some degree in all societies, but social movements do not always appear in response, and their intensity does not vary systematically with the level of strain (della Porta & Diani, 2006; Goodwin & Jasper, 2004; McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996). Instead of focusing on social strains, some social psychologists have looked for psychological factors or attitudes that might explain which individuals are likely to get involved in social movements, focusing on such factors as authoritarian personality, emotional conflicts with parents, alienation, aggression, and relative deprivation. However, empirical investigations have found very little support for a relationship between these types of psychological characteristics and social movement participation (della Porta & Diani, 2006).

Theory and research about social movements have flourished in the past four decades. Throughout the 1970s, social movement scholars in the United States and Europe worked independently of each other and developed different theories and different research emphases (McAdam et al., 1996). In the past 20 years, however, U.S. and European social movement scholars have begun to work together and to engage in comparative analysis of social movements across place and time. Originally, these collaborative efforts focused only on social movements in the United States and Western Europe. Social movements scholarship has begun to extend comparative analysis beyond the United States and Europe to nonindustrialized countries.
as well as to social movements that cross national lines (Smith, Chatfield, & Pagnucco, 1997; Tarrow, 2006). No doubt, the Arab spring uprisings and the Occupy Wall Street mobilizations of 2011 will be the subject of study in the years to come.

Three perspectives on social movements have emerged out of this lively recent interest, referred to in this article as the political opportunities perspective, the mobilizing structures perspective, and the cultural framing perspective. There is growing agreement among social movement scholars that none of these perspectives taken alone provides adequate tools for understanding social movements (della Porta & Diani, 2006; Goodwin & Jasper, 2004; McAdam et al., 1996; Tarrow, 1994, 1998, 2006). Each perspective adds important dimensions to the understanding of social movements, however, and taken together they provide a relatively comprehensive theory of social movements. Social movement scholars recommend research that synthesizes concepts across the three perspectives. The resource mobilization and cultural framing perspectives have been used to analyze the role of religion in social movements, but the political opportunities perspective has not been used in such analysis, with one notable exception (Wald, Silverman, & Fridy, 2005). The cultural framing perspective has potential for analyzing the role of spirituality in progressive social movements, but that potential is currently unfulfilled.

Political Opportunities Perspective

Writing about the role of religion in social movement mobilization, Wald et al. (2005) note that:

> Social movements do not exist in a political vacuum where range of motion is unobstructed and all choices are equally sound. Instead, they arise and act in a political environment full of formal and informal structures that provide both incentives and disincentives for political mobilization. (p. 136)

They go on to say that these insights have not been incorporated into the study of religiously based social movements.

The political opportunities (PO) perspective begins with the assumption that social institutions, particularly political and economic institutions, benefit the more powerful members of society, often called elites, and disadvantage many. The elites typically have routine access to institutionalized political channels, whereas disadvantaged groups are denied access. Power disparities make it very difficult for some groups to successfully challenge existing institutions, but the PO perspective suggests that institutions are not consistently invulnerable to challenge by groups with little power. Social
movements can at times take advantage of institutional arrangements that are vulnerable to challenge (Morris, 2000).

The political system itself may influence whether a social movement will emerge at a given time, as well as the form the movement will take. Social movement scholars have identified several influential dimensions of political systems and analyzed the ways in which changes in one or more of these dimensions make the political system receptive or vulnerable to challenges (della Porta & Diani, 2006; Tarrow, 2006). Four of those dimensions are examined here: openness of the political system, stability of political alignments, availability of elite allies, and international relations.

OPENNESS OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

It might seem reasonable to think that activists will undertake collective action when political systems are open and avoid such action when political systems are closed. The relationship of system openness or closure to social movement activity is not that simple, however (Meyer, 2004). They have instead a curvilinear relationship: Neither full access nor its total absence encourages the greatest degree of collective action. Some resistance stimulates movement solidarity, but too much resistance makes collective action too costly for social movement participants (Meyer, 2004). The nature of the political structure will also affect the types of social movement activities that emerge in a given society.

In general, democratic states facilitate social movements and authoritarian states repress them (della Porta & Diani, 2006). However, because democratic states invite participation, even criticism, many challenging issues that might spark social movements are “processed” out of existence through electoral processes. It is hard to mount a social movement if it seems that the political system is easily influenced without serious collective action. Conversely, the repression found in authoritarian states may serve to radicalize social movement leaders (della Porta, 1996). And as was evident in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, and several Arab states in the spring of 2011, authoritarian states are not always effective in repressing challenges. The political leadership’s efforts to appease the population by offering small liberties can have a snowball effect. Relaxation of social control in a previously repressive political system often has the unintended consequence of fueling the fire of long-held grievances (Marx & McAdam, 1994).

A given political system is not equally open or closed to all challengers at a given time; some social movements are favored over others. Even in a democracy, universal franchise does not mean equal access to the political system; wealth buys access not easily available to poor people’s movements (Bornstein, 2009; della Porta & Diani, 2006; Piven & Cloward, 1977). Indeed, the rapid success and growth of the living wage movement has been a surprise to many who support it ideologically, because poor people’s movements have been difficult to sustain in the past.
The success of one social movement can open the political system to the challenge of other social movements. For example, successful legislative action by the mid-20th century Black civil rights movement opened the way for other civil rights movements, particularly the women’s movement, which benefited from the targeting of women in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (McAdam, 1996a). But a successful movement may also open the way for opponent movements, called countermovements, as well as for allied movements. And, indeed, the living wage movement has engendered opposition coalitions that have launched intensive lobbying campaigns to convince state legislators in several states to bar cities from establishing their own minimum wages, and some living wage ordinances were repealed after passage (Murray, 2001; National Employment Law Project, 2011; Quigley, 2001).

**STABILITY OF POLITICAL ALIGNMENTS**

PO theorists agree that the routine transfer of political power from one group of incumbents to another, as when a different political party takes control of the U.S. presidency or Congress, opens opportunities for the development or reactivation of social movements (Tarrow, 2006). At such times, some social movements lose favor and others gain opportunity. In both the 1930s and 1960s, changes in political party strength appear to have been related to increased social movement activity among poor people (McAdam et al., 1996).

Disruption of political alliances also occurs at times other than political elections, for both partisan and nonpartisan reasons, and such disruptions produce conflicts and divisions among elites. When elites are divided, social movements can sometimes encourage some factions to take a stand for the disenfranchised and support the goals of the movement. Disruptions in political alliances also occur when different branches of the government—such as the executive branch and the legislative branch—are at odds with each other. Such conflict was the case at the national level in the early days of the living wage campaign, but may have had little effect on the campaign because it was being fought at the local level. New coalitions may be formed, and the uncertainty that ensues may encourage groups to make new or renewed attempts to challenge institutional arrangements, hoping to find new elite allies. The new local coalitions formed during the living wage campaigns have often breathed new life into local progressive advocates, including religious groups (Murray, 2001).

**AVAILABILITY OF ELITE ALLIES**

Participants in social movements often lack both power and resources for influencing the political process. But they may be assisted by influential
allies who play a variety of supportive roles. These elite allies may pro-
vide financial support, or they may provide name and face recognition
that attracts media attention to the goals and activities of the movement.
Research indicates a strong correlation between the presence of elite allies
and social movement success (della Porta & Diani, 2006). In the living wage
movement, high profile religious leaders often serve as elite allies to local
low-wage workers and labor activists. When students in the Harvard Living
Wage Campaign engaged in a sit-in strike in the university president’s office
in the spring of 2001, religious leaders at Harvard’s Memorial Church and
the Harvard Hillel performed services to support the students, and support-
ive appearances were made by other elite allies, including Congressman
Edward M. Kennedy, former Labor Secretary Robert Reich, Chairman of the
NAACP Julian Bond, and actors Ben Affleck and Matt Damon (Gourevitch,
2001; Tanner, 2002; Terkel, 2003).

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Since the eighteenth century, social movements have diffused rapidly across
national boundaries, and the fate of national social movements has been
influenced by international events. In the 19th century, the antislavery move-
ment, with strong support of British and North American Quakers, spread
from England to France, the Netherlands, and the Americas (Stamatov, 2010;
Tarrow, 2006). The mid-20th century Black civil rights movement in the
United States was influenced by international attention to the gap between
our national image as champion of human rights and the racial discrimina-
tion that permeated our social institutions (McAdam, 1996a). The fight for
the right for women to vote was first won in New Zealand in the 1880s;
the United States followed almost 40 years later in 1920. It took some time,
but gradually the movement for women’s suffrage spread around the world
(Sernau, 2006). The recent revolution in communication technology, cou-
pled with the globalization of market systems, is quickening the diffusion
of collective action, as evidenced by the global peace and social justice
movements (della Porta & Diani, 2006; Tarrow, 2006). The protest against
corporate globalization that took place at the 1999 meeting of the World
Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle was only one action in several years of
work by an international coalition of more than 1,200 labor, religious, con-
sumer, environmental, farm, academic, and human rights groups from over
90 nations (Newman, 2008). The Occupy Wall Street movement that began
in the United States in the fall of 2011 was joined by rallies of solidarity
across the globe by mid-October (CNN iReport, 2011).

Mobilizing Structures Perspective

The mobilizing structures (MS) perspective starts from this basic premise:
Given their disadvantaged position in the political system, social movement
leaders must seek out and mobilize the resources they need—people, money, information, ideas, and skills—in order to reduce the costs and increase the benefits of movement activities (Davis, McAdam, Scott, & Zald, 2005; della Porta & Diani, 2006; Morris, 2004). In the MS perspective, social movements have no influence without effective organization of various kinds of mobilizing structures—existing informal networks and formal organizations through which people mobilize and engage in collective action. Mobilizing structures are the collective building blocks of social movements.

**Informal and Formal Structures**

MS scholars agree that social movements typically do not start from scratch but build on existing structures. They disagree, however, on the relative importance of informal versus formal structures. The MS perspective has two theoretical building blocks: one, resource mobilization theory, which emphasizes formal mobilizing structures; and another, the network model, which emphasizes informal mobilizing structures.

Resource mobilization theory focuses on the organization and coordination of movement activities through formal organizations called social movement organizations (SMOs) (Davis et al., 2005). Theorists in this tradition are particularly interested in professional social movement organizations, staffed by leaders and activists who make a professional career out of reform causes (della Porta & Diani, 2006; Morris, 2004). The professional staff engages in fund-raising and attempts to speak for the constituency represented by the movement. There are advantages to professional SMOs, because social movements are more likely to meet their goals when they have a well-structured organization to engage in continuous fund-raising and lobbying. There are also problems, however. Professional SMOs must respond to the wishes of the benefactors who may be comfortable with low level claims only. Theda Skocpol (2003) argues that professionalization can lead to movement defeat by taming protest.

The network model, in contrast, focuses on everyday ties between people, in grassroots settings, as the basic structures for the communication and social solidarity necessary for mobilization (della Porta & Diani, 2006; Tindall, 2004). In this model, the focus is on naturally existing networks based in family, work, religious, educational, and neighborhood relationships, or such networks as those that can be found at alternative cafes and bookshops and social and cultural centers. Naturally existing social networks facilitate recruitment to movement activities and support continued participation. These natural networks are hard to repress and control because, in a democratic society, people have the right to congregate in their private homes and other informal settings.

Although resource mobilization theory and the network model disagree about the relative merits of formal and informal structures, they do agree
that the costs of mobilizing social movements are minimized by drawing on preexisting structures and networks (Davis et al., 2005; Tindall, 2004). Several social movement scholars have noted the particularly “religious roots and character of many American movements” (McAdam et al., 1996, p. 18; Wood, 2002). They suggest that this link is not surprising, given the higher rates of church affiliation and attendance in the United States than in other comparable Western democracies.

Religious institutions are particularly well placed for mobilizing social action because they provide both informal and formal structures. At the most informal level, local congregations can be powerful players in mounting reform movements. Perhaps the best example of this was the mid-20th century Black civil rights movement, which was heavily dependent on Black ministers to mobilize their congregations (Zald, 1982). The sanctuary movement in the United States is another example of a progressive social movement rooted in local congregations. In the 1980s, some churches and synagogues promised to be sanctuaries for people who were being deported back to war-torn regions (Van Ham, 2009). Beginning in 2007, a new sanctuary movement was launched to support people who had come to the United States for economic reasons. Sanctuary congregations provide “hospitality and protection” (p. 83) to a limited number of immigrant families facing deportation (Snarr, 2009). In a similar way, Anglican churches in South Africa served as “de facto opposition headquarters” for the anti-apartheid movement (Wald et al., 2005, p. 135). In their research on civic voluntarism in the United States, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) found that people were three to four times more likely to be politically mobilized in a church than in a worker’s union. Zald (1982) suggests that communication networks are strongest at the local congregation level.

Although local congregations are often active participants in progressive social movements, some authors argue that the most influential and most powerful religious organizing comes from local, regional, and national interfaith coalitions (see Snarr, 2007, 2009; Wolcott, 1982). These coalitions provide a larger pool of resources than individual congregations, and they can appeal to even unaffiliated believers. Congregation-based community organizing networks have sprung up across the United States, forming local coalitions of faith leaders to engage in community organizing for local progressive causes (Snarr, 2009). BUILD is an example of a local interfaith coalition; similar coalitions have been instrumental in winning living wage ordinances in cities across the United States. The living wage movement that developed out of these local efforts has spawned at least two national faith-based economic justice networks that provide resources to local coalitions: Interfaith Worker Justice and the Let Justice Roll Living Wage Campaign. Interfaith Worker Justice Web site (2011) provides this statement of mission: “calls upon our religious values in order to educate, organize, and mobilize the religious community in the U.S. on issues and campaigns that will
improve wages, benefits, and working conditions for workers, especially low-wage workers.” Since its founding in 1996, it has grown to include a network of 52 local interfaith justice organizations (Snarr, 2009). Let Justice Roll Living Wage Campaign (2011) is a coalition of faith, community, labor, and business groups committed to raising the minimum wage to a living wage at both the state and federal level. It has 100 member organizations and has been instrumental in successes at both the state and federal level.

Not only do these local, regional, and national coalitions have more resources than local congregations, they also are less likely to be constrained by conservative congregational members who oppose progressive social action. During the Little Rock desegregation case in 1957, national church organizations supported desegregation, but local ministers, even if their sentiments favored desegregation, were immobilized by the opposition of influential members of their congregations (Campbell & Pettigrew, 1959). In the late 1960s, national church bodies were also forced to limit social activism because of intense pressure from local congregations (Wolcott, 1982). Interfaith councils have been more immune to pressures from conservative lay members of religious groups.

RESOURCES TO BE MOBILIZED

Successful social movements must mobilize a large array of resources, and religious institutions are rich sources for many of these resources. Wald, Silverman, and Fridy (2005) identify five types of resources that religious organizations can offer to emerging as well as established social movements: “culture, leadership, material resources, communication networks, and space” (p. 131). Most of these resources derive from the infrastructure of religious organizations and not from their spiritual bases; an infrastructure not provided by individualized spirituality.

First, the culture of a religious group provides shared values draped in a powerful sacred canopy. Trust is one product of this canopy, and trust is essential to hold a movement together (Snarr, 2009). The sense of belonging to a sacred community can motivate people to take on the costs of becoming activists. The mobilizing structures perspective notes the tendency of people to be “free-riders,” to share the concerns of the movement but hold back from becoming involved. It has been suggested that the sacred canopy helps to overcome the free-rider challenge (Snarr, 2007; Wald et al., 2005).

A number of studies have found that religion has provided ideological motivation for women to participate in a number of major social movements over time, including the abolitionist, antilynching, civil rights, antipoverty, welfare rights, and peace movements. Historical analysis indicates that women in these movements were often motivated by “religiously grounded moral imperatives for love, justice, peace, or equity” (Faver, 2000, p. 63).
Effective social movements often owe much of their success to dedicated, wise, and skilled leadership. Clergy are experienced in leading congregations of people with diverse attitudes and skills through both harmonious and contentious times. These clergy are often skilled at building bridges where points of tension exist. From participant observation in two living wage campaigns and interview and primary document reviews of three other campaigns, Snarr (2009) found that religious leaders often play bridge-building roles in these campaigns. They engage in ideology translation, helping different sectors of the coalition to understand each other’s frameworks; for example, they help movement members to see that worker dignity is the goal whether they use the language of “each worker as a child of God” or the language of “workers united will never be divided” (p. 78). Snarr (2009) also found that religious leaders often engaged in relational repair when interpersonal tensions arose in the campaigns. In addition, religious leaders were typically the people who monitored “who is at the table” and advocated for broad inclusion.

Clergy are a source of experienced leadership for progressive social movements, but religious organizations also provide opportunities for lay congregation members to develop leadership skills, which they may subsequently use to the benefit of a social movement. The Catholic Worker Movement was sparked by a network of lay leaders and continues to operate outside the official organizations of the Roman Catholic Church (Parrish & Taylor, 2007). Snarr (2009) found that low-wage workers in the living wage campaign had learned to run committee meetings, organize congregational events, and find their voice in their churches, synagogues, and mosques. Wald et al. (2005) note that Black protestant churches are often “remarkably effective incubators of political leadership” (p. 133).

Material resources are also crucial to the success of a social movement. Money is needed for a host of activities, including printing flyers, sending direct mail appeals, constructing banners and placards, transporting protesters to events, and sometimes to bail demonstrators out of jail (see Smith, 1996). Religious groups make donations at the local congregational level, but larger donations typically come from the regional and national offices of religious groups (Wolcott, 1982). Religious organizations may also donate such material resources as a place to meet and access to a copy machine (Snarr, 2007).

Communication networks are essential for an effective social movement. The movement must be able to recruit and maintain participants, and they must be able to get the word out about the who, what, when, and where of a given movement action. Clergy have captive audiences during regular times of worship, and most religious organizations have mailing lists and methods for communicating regularly with the membership. In addition, members of religious organizations are often in communication with each
other in ongoing meetings as well as in informal interactions (Wald et al., 2005; Zald, 1982).

The final type of resource noted by Wald et al. (2005) is space. They were not referring just to a space to meet, but instead to a “political space,” a protected social structure outside the direct influence of the government. It is not always the case, but even in harsh oppressive regimes, religious leaders and religious buildings are usually spared the harshest treatment: “One cannot attack a people’s God without incurring their fiercest wrath” (p. 136). Wald and colleagues (2005) suggest that only the most desperate governments fail to give leeway to religious leaders and buildings.

Cultural Framing Perspective

The cultural framing perspective asserts that a social movement can succeed only when participants develop shared understandings and definitions of the situation. These shared meanings develop through a transactional process of consciousness raising, which social movement scholars call cultural framing, defined as “conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action” (McAdam et al., 1996, p. 6). Both religious and nonreligious spiritual belief systems can provide a framework for engagement in collective action, and there is a small literature that analyzes the role of religion in social movement framing, noted below. It seems likely that much, if not most, participation in progressive social movements is motivated by spiritual beliefs, but analysis of the role of spirituality in framing social movements is almost nonexistent, a point that will be discussed later.

Social movement leaders and participants engage in a delicate balancing act as they construct cultural frames. To legitimate collective action, cultural frames must impel people to feel aggrieved or outraged about some situation they consider unjust. But to motivate people to engage in collective action, cultural frames must be optimistic about the possibilities for improving the situation. Consider a chant developed by the divinity students at Harvard in their support of the student living wage sit-in action: “Where’s your horror? Where’s your rage? Div School wants a living wage” (Weiss, 2001, para. 15). The chant dramatized the severity of the situation and the fairness of their cause, but it also expressed hope for a solution. Simultaneously, social movements want to draw heavily on existing cultural symbols so that the movement frame will resonate with people’s cultural understandings while they add new frames to the cultural stock, thus sponsoring new ways of thinking about social conditions. The challenge of this balancing act is “how to put forward a set of unsettling demands for unconventional people in ways that will not make enemies out of potential allies” (Tarrow, 1994, p. 10). The BUILD coalition was wise in choosing to call their cause “a living wage” rather than a “minimum wage.” The notion that workers should draw
a wage that allows them to “live” is morally persuasive, and even those who oppose the living wage movement have suggested that it is hard to take a public stance that you are opposed to such an idea (Malanga, 2003).

Cultural frames are “metaphors, symbols, and cognitive cues that cast issues in a particular light and suggest possible ways to respond to these issues” (Davis et al., 2005, pp. 48–49). A complication in the process of constructing frames is that frames attractive to one audience are likely to be rejected by other audiences. Social movement groups “must master the art of simultaneously playing to a variety of publics, threatening opponents, and pressuring the state, all the while appearing nonthreatening and sympathetic to the media and other publics” (McAdam, 1996b, p. 344). Activists desire media attention because that is the most effective way to reach wide audiences, but they also know that they cannot control the way the movement will be framed by the media. The media are attracted to dramatic, even violent, aspects of a movement, but these aspects are likely to be rejected by other audiences (Stein, 2009). They are often more interested in scandal than in providing substantive information on movement issues (della Porta & Diani, 2006). ACORN, an SMO that was very helpful to the living wage campaign in the United States, became the subject of a highly publicized scandal in September, 2009 regarding the behavior of a few local staff caught in what appeared to be unethical behavior on hidden camera (Farrell, 2009). Movement activists are particularly concerned about the impact of the media on their conscience constituency—people attracted to the movement because it appears just and worthy, not because they will benefit personally.

Social movement framing is never a matter of easy consensus building, and intense framing contests may arise among a variety of actors, particularly in the later stages. Representatives of the political system and participants in countermovements influence framing through their own actions and public statements, and internal conflicts within the movement may become more pronounced over time. Leaders and followers often have different frames for the movement (Marx & McAdam, 1994), and there are often splits between moderate and radical participants. It is not at all unusual for movements to put forth multiple frames, with different groups sponsoring different frames. When a movement captures media attention, there is often an intense struggle over who speaks for the movement and which cultural frame is put forward.

Qualitative analysis of social movement framing has been a popular topic in the social movement literature in the past few years. This literature indicates that cultural framing provides language, ideology, and symbols for understanding that a problem exists, for recognizing windows of opportunity, for establishing goals, and for identifying pathways for action (Polletta, 2004).
FRAMES FOR UNDERSTANDING THAT A PROBLEM EXISTS

Social movements are actively involved in the “naming” of grievances and injustices. They do so in part by drawing on existing cultural symbols, but they also underscore, accentuate, and enlarge current understanding of the seriousness of a situation. In essence, they call attention to contradictions between cultural ideals and cultural realities. For example, the religious-based antislavery movement in the United States defined slavery as a sin, using a “good versus evil” frame (Whooley, 2004). Morality frames like this can strike a chord in the community, but they can also create a backlash. Mika (2006) used focus groups of U.S. university students to analyze reactions to different frames used by PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals). The participants reported consistently strong negative reactions to religiously based moral frames, particularly those that declared that Jesus was a vegetarian. They reported feeling personally attacked and made to feel guilty by these frames.

The living wage movement calls attention to the discrepancy between working and receiving a wage that does not allow you to rise out of poverty. Calling attention to this discrepancy is important in the United States, where the public tends to believe that people are poor because they don’t work. The international antiglobalization movement has used “globalization” as a catchword to symbolize the misery and exploitation caused by the dominance of market forces in contemporary life. When 50,000 demonstrators, some of whom represented religious institutions, protested against the WTO meeting in Seattle on November 30, 1999, they used a number of slogans to frame globalization as a problem (della Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 163):

- The world is not for sale.
- No globalization without representation.
- We are citizens, not only consumers.
- WTO = Capitalism without conscience.

FRAMES FOR RECOGNIZING A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

The perception of opportunity to change a troublesome situation is also culturally framed to some extent (della Porta & Diani, 2006; Gamson & Meyer, 1996; Polletta, 2004). On occasion, it is easy to develop a shared frame that opportunity exists or does not exist, but most situations are more ambiguous. Social movement leaders must successfully construct a perception that change is possible, because an opportunity does not exist unless it is recognized. They typically attempt to overcome concerns about the dangers and futility of activism by focusing on the risks of inaction, communicating a sense of urgency, and emphasizing the openness of the moment—intent on keeping hope alive.
Calibrating this type of frame is a difficult task. On the one hand, overstating an opportunity can be hazardous (Piven & Cloward, 1977). Without “fortifying myths,” which allow participants to see defeats as mere setbacks, unrealistically high expectations can degenerate into pessimism about possibilities for change (Voss, 1996). On the other hand, “movement activists systematically overestimate the degree of political opportunity, and if they did not, they would not be doing their job wisely” (Gamson & Meyer, 1996, p. 285). Unrealistic perceptions about what is possible can actually make change more possible. BUILD may not have been satisfied with the size of the worker raise that came out of their campaign, but their expectations led them to bold action, which brought some improvements in the lives of some workers, inspired living wage coalitions in other cities, sparked national worker justice organizations, and motivated international efforts.

**Frames for Establishing Goals**

Once it has been established that both problem and opportunity exist, the question of social movement goals arises. Is change to be narrow or sweeping, reformist or revolutionary? The 19th century abolitionist movement set the goal to end slavery, but there was internal controversy about what the goal should be. Many Blacks as well as some White women in the movement preferred a rights frame, which would extend the goal to equality and freedom beyond ending slavery. However, influential White abolitionists were unwilling to expand the goal in that way (Whooley, 2004).

Typically, goals are poorly articulated in the early stages of a movement but are clarified through ongoing negotiations about the desired changes. Manuals for social activism suggest that modest and winnable objectives in the early stages of a movement help to reinforce the possibility of change (Gamson & Meyer, 1996). Indeed, the early goals for the living wage movement were quite modest. The wage increase secured by BUILD only covered 1,500 to 2,000 workers. By 2001, it was estimated that the combined efforts of all local living wage campaigns had brought the number to only about 100,000 workers (Quigley, 2001; Tanner, 2002). Some progressives were critical of a movement that was yielding so little, but other analysts argued that it was the modest and winnable nature of the early campaigns that neutralized opposition and built a momentum of success (Murray, 2001). Certainly, it is true that the movement has become more ambitious in its goals over-time, moving from improving the wages of a small number of municipal contract workers to large-scale citywide ordinances as well as to statewide minimum wage laws. European activists’ demands that all garment workers in the retail supply chain be paid a living wage would have far-reaching results across national lines (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2009).

Social workers Ray MacNair, Leigh Fowler, and John Harris (2000) suggest that progressive social movements have a three-pronged goal: (a) They
must confront oppression, (b) they must attend to the damaged identities of oppressed persons, and (c) they must “renovate” the cultural roles of both oppressor groups and oppressed groups. The living wage movement has paid a lot of attention to the first two of these goals. It has named the oppression, and it has actively engaged low-wage earners in the struggle. It is not clear how much work is being done on the third goal, but religious institutions are well suited to lead in that type of healing process.

**Frames for Identifying Pathways for Action**

Some of the most important framing efforts of a social movement involve tactical choices for accomplishing goals. Social movement scholars generally agree that each society has a repertoire of forms of collective action that are familiar to social movement participants as well as the elites they challenge (Tarrow, 2006). New forms are introduced from time to time, and they spread quickly if they are successful. In the United States, for example, marches on Washington have come to be standard fare in collective action, and activist groups exchange information on the logistics of organizing a march on Washington. On the other hand, the sit-down strike is no longer as common as it once was, although university students in the living wage movement have brought it back in the form of sit-in strikes in recent years and occupying a space is the thrust of the Occupy Wall Street movement begun in the fall of 2011 (Gourevitch, 2001; McAdam, 1996b). Contemporary social movements draw power from the large selection of forms of collective action currently in the cultural stock, and many movements have wisely used multiple forms of action (della Porta & Diani, 2006; Tarrow, 2006). The living wage movement has made use of lobbying, postcard campaigns, door-knocking campaigns, leafleting, rallies, sit-ins, workshops, newspaper ads, song books, and advocacy videos (Snarr, 2007, 2009).

The repertoire of collective action is handed down, but there is some improvisation by individual movements. For example, public marches are a standard part of the repertoire, but there have been innovations to the march in recent years, such as closing rallies and the incorporation of theatrical forms. Participants in the global justice movement are using some longstanding action forms such as petitions, reports and press releases, sit-ins, marches, lobbying, blockades, and boycotts. They are also using recent action innovations as well as developing new action forms. Their repertoire includes concerts, vigils, theatrical masks, puppets, electronic advocacy, documentaries, and buycotts of fair trade products (della Porta & Diani, 2006).

Just as social movement goals fall on a continuum from reform to revolution, forms of collective action can be arranged along a continuum from conventional to violent. Nonviolent forms of collective action are the core of contemporary U.S. movements, and the type of action preferred by
Spirituality, Religion, and Progressive Social Movements

Religiously based, progressive social movements. Nonviolent disruption of routine activities is today considered the most powerful form of activism in democracies with relatively stable governments (della Porta & Diani, 2006). The power of nonviolent disruption is that it creates uncertainty and some fear of violence, yet provides authorities in democratic societies with no valid argument for repression. Violent collective action, on the other hand, destroys public support for the movement. Martin Luther King was ingenious in recognizing that the best path for the U.S. civil rights movement was “successfully courting violence while restraining violence in his followers” (McAdam, 1996b, p. 349). Consequently, it was the police who lost public favor for their brutality, not the demonstrators. Some action forms, such as marches and petitions, are used to demonstrate numerical strength. Other action forms, such as conferences, concerts, documentaries, and buyouts of fair products, are used to bear witness to the substantive issues. And still other action forms are designed to do damage to the parties reputed to be at blame for an unfair situation. Small-scale violence does this, as do boycotts. Not only do these later action forms run the risk of escalating repression and alienating sympathizers, boycotts run the risk of damaging workers (della Porta & Diani, 2006).

In an interesting development, a new organizing tactic has been used in peace and justice campaigns. The proponents of this tactic call it creative play. They argue that “changing entrenched systems of oppression requires shifts in emotional as well as intellectual attitudes” (Shephard, 2005, p. 52). Furthermore, “culture-poems, songs, paintings, murals, chants, sermons, quilts, stories, rhythms, weavings, pots, and dances can make such emotional and visceral breakthroughs possible” (Si Kahn, cited in Shephard, 2005, p. 52). One global movement, Reclaim the Streets, uses street parties as its organizing tool. One advocate of this approach suggests that “Performance with humor can disarm fear. When we laugh, we can listen, we can learn. . . . When people participate in a play, opportunities for new perspectives and transformation emerge” (cited in Shepherd, 2005, p. 55).

The history of religiously based social movements identifies a recurrent tension about the choice of reform-oriented tactics. Influenced by the revivalism movement of the age, leaders of the U.S. antislavery movement preferred a tactic of conversion, or moral persuasion, “saving one soul at a time,” rather than a tactic of challenging social institutions. They saw themselves as “holy crusaders” (Whooley, 2004). Writing in 1973, Garrett suggested that the tactic of bringing about social change by converting men and women one by one has been more pervasive among religious groups in the United States than tactics aimed at changing institutions. He argued that this preference is consistent with the strong emphasis on individualism in U.S. culture. Nevertheless, over time, religious groups in the United States have mobilized progressive social movements with the explicit intent to challenge institutions. Notable examples include the Catholic Worker Movement, the
mid-20th century Black civil rights movement, and the contemporary worker justice movement.

MISSING DIMENSIONS

Although the three dominant perspectives discussed above, political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and cultural framing, when taken together, are seen to provide a relatively comprehensive framework for understanding social movements, some social movement scholars have suggested that they fail to attend to some important dimensions of social movements, most notably emotional and spiritual dimensions. Those criticisms may open the way for new social movement theorizing.

Deborah Gould (2004) argues that social movement researchers should take another look at the role of emotions in motivating people to participate in social movement activities. She contends that the social movement literature has fallen short by attending to rationality but not emotions of movement participants. She applauds the rejection of earlier attempts to understand social movement actors in terms of psychopathologies but suggests that social movements are passionate political processes and emotions must be considered. She proposes that social movement researchers should study the role that emotions such as anger, indignation, hope, and pride play in motivating social movement involvement. She recounts her own qualitative research with lesbians and gays who participate in ACT UP, noting the important role that grief and anger about AIDS and the slow response to it played in moving participants to action. In another analysis, Karen Stanbridge and J. Scott Kenney (2009) suggest that victims’ rights advocates must manage the grief, fear, and anger related to the victim experience in their public protest action. This raises an important question for social movement leaders: Should they appeal to both emotional and intellectual understanding of injustice? If so, what are the best methods to do this? These are the questions that Gould recommends that social movement researchers investigate.

Particularly germane to this discussion, a few scholars have called attention to an unfolding trend of grassroots mobilization that is spurred by spiritual but not necessarily religious motives. They argue that we need more theory that considers spirituality as a resource in social movements (see Poonamallee, 2011). Using data from the cross-national comparative survey “Religion and Esotericism among Students,” Höllinger (2004) found that, compared to other university students, New Age followers had higher rates of participation in political protests. In an article entitled “The Spiritual is Political,” Mallory (2010) chronicles the role that earth-based spirituality plays in motivating women to participate in the forest defense movement. Poonamallee (2011) writes about the role that spirituality played in
a community-based movement to rejuvenate the environment and economy in the Avari region of India. In an ethnographic study of this movement, Poonamallee found that participants in the movement were motivated by a sense of the sacred, “a sense of interconnectedness with not only people but also with the universe at large” (p. 147). The participants understood the sense of the sacred to call for responsibility to the whole of nature.

CONCLUSION

The social movement literature has paid little attention to the role of religion in progressive social movements, and almost no attention to the role of spirituality. And, yet it is clear that religious organizations have been major players in a number of such movements. In 1994, Marx and McAdam predicted that religious institutions are one of four seedbeds for future social movements, along with colleges and universities, stable residential neighborhoods, and formal SMOs. Religious institutions provide a rich infrastructure for movement mobilization. It is clear, however, that the same religious texts can be and have been used to justify both progressive and defensive social movements. Furthermore, religious groups often decide that political action is outside the scope of religion. But if history is the best predictor of the future, it is likely that religious institutions will continue to be key players in progressive social movements.

Very little attention has been given to the role of spirituality in motivating participation in progressive social movements, but a few recent articles have acknowledged how the spiritual aspects of religion serve as motivation for reform action (Snarr, 2007, 2009; Wald et al., 2005). The social sciences have been reluctant to engage the topic of spirituality, but spiritual motivation for involvement in progressive social movements is fertile ground for future analysis. What types of spiritual belief systems can be found among movement participants? What connections do movement participants make between their spiritual beliefs and activism? Do nonreligiously based systems of belief sustain progressive action as well as religiously based ones? Answers to these types of questions can provide deeper understanding of the motivations for progressive social movement activism.

REFERENCES


