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## MOVEMENT ANALYSIS ON THE FLY: THE LIMITS AND PROMISE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE\*

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*Abstract: Disciplined academic study of social movements should help us make sense of the movements and politics of our time, but social science often leads us astray. Particularly, the ideal of limiting the frame of analysis in terms of independent and dependent variables and in terms of time routinely neglects the disparate causes and effects of social protest. These challenges are particularly acute when considering contemporaneous campaigns, that is, analysis on the fly. Using the case of the first Women's March, staged the day after Donald Trump became president of the United States, I elaborate the false steps that social science analysis encourages by: identifying patterned errors of exclusion: applying misplaced model; producing unduly narrow fields of action; the difficulty of evaluating practical possibilities; the challenge of assessing institutionalization; and the necessity of truncating time. I conclude with suggestions for continuing to engage in analysis of contemporary movements and ways to avoid egregious errors while doing so.*

For a student of social protest and politics, the Trump administration offered an embarrassing abundance of obvious opportunities and challenges. Protest was everywhere. By the time Donald Trump had taken the oath of office, a large anti-Trump movement had taken root. On the day of his inaugural, hundreds of Disrupt J-20 protesters assembled without permit in Washington, DC, some scuffling with police, a few breaking windows of visible targets, like Starbuck's Coffee and the Bank of America. The next day, January 20, 2017, an estimated half-million people assembled on the Washington Mall for a Women's March, joined by scores of sister marches across the country. Crowd-sourced estimates identify more than four million protesters across the country, a total that far surpasses the largest single day of protest in American history.

And it didn't end then. The following week, a sudden change in immigration policy generated protests at international airports across the country, with protesters holding signs, some wearing the pink pussy hats that dotted the Women's March, others holding signs offering free legal services to travelers caught in transition. Subsequent weekends featured a parade of protests, including days for (or without) women and immigrants, marches for science, for climate change, for truth, for tax justice, and on and on (Fisher 2019). For the scholar, it was so much data—the best of times.

For someone living in the United States, however, it may have been significantly less than that. The new president sat atop a chaotic administration, plagued by rapid personnel turnover, ongoing battles in the courts, and an explicitly divisive approach to politics that represented a real break with previous presidents of both parties. Moreover, there were consequences. To feed a white nationalist base of support, the Trump administration instituted a harsh approach to all sorts of immigration, turning away refugees and routinely separating

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† From a talk originally delivered on April 1, 2017, at the University of Notre Dame. This title is inspired by Snow and Moss (2014), who write about activists' improvisations in the context of collective action. I'm thankful for useful comments from Neal Caren, the help and support from scholars in the CBSM/Mobilization community, and particularly grateful for the initial and ongoing support from Bill Gamson and Sid Tarrow.

immigrant children from their families, keeping records poorly enough that eventual reunification of families seemed unlikely. It was the worst of times.

Media attention to social movements and those of us who study them was unusually strong. As one of those scholars, I enjoyed a better opportunity to present my ideas in public forums.<sup>1</sup> There was an appetite for analysis, to be sure, but it wasn't about the diffusion of frames or the expression of emotions or the nature of tactical innovation of those participating, it was about impact. The recurrent question was whether these protests would actually matter. Reporters asked not only out of academic curiosity, but because the stakes seemed so high. Protesters were trying to save the United States, or maybe the world, from the evils they saw lurking in the Trump administration. The question was whether all of their efforts might actually work.

That question of effect was what lured me into this enterprise so long ago, and I've worked to understand the scholarship of so many accomplished researchers, and to make sense of the world around me. As the Resistance developed, however, I came to wonder whether the tools of social science prove inadequate to answer this critical question, and [might](#) even lead us astray. Using the example of the current resistance campaign, I pose questions about movement emergence and influence that concern pragmatic politics, but that the well-developed research traditions we've developed can't quite accommodate. I then offer a few modest suggestions for improving the kinds of research we can do, citing some signal examples of open questions. A useful social movement scholarship would be able to offer commentary on the contemporary political scene, without sacrificing rigor to the demands of the moment. It would offer understandable explanations of both the protest campaigns of the moment, nested in a larger world of more general protest politics. I hope that we can get there; I want to begin, however, by recounting how I got here.

## SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN LITERATURE

I knew when I started college that I wanted to study social protest and quickly locked into the place to do it: the English Department. I wrote a senior thesis about the politics of social protest, focusing on the writing of [Henry David](#) Thoreau and Percy Bysshe Shelley. I got to read some great writing by accomplished authors who saw themselves as forcefully and morally political. And the claims were bold!

Thoreau wrote, "I know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men whom I could name - if ten honest men only - ay, if one HONEST man, in this State of Massachusetts, ceasing to hold slaves, were actually to withdraw from this co-partnership, and be locked up in county jail therefore, it would be the abolition of slavery in America. For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done forever" (Thoreau 1965: 243). Shelley was even more confident in the power of the written word, concluding his posthumously published valedictory, "A Defence of Poetry," with the proclamation, "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."<sup>2</sup>

Alas, sometime in the process of writing a senior thesis I began to lose faith in the unalloyed power of the word, or at least to think that the process of social change was a little more complicated. Thoreau's celebrated night in jail in 1846, the lecture delivered in 1848, or the essay published the following year did very little to end slavery. There is a self-conscious self-righteous politics of assertion uncoupled from any thought of real political influence; it's a politics of adolescence (Shulz 2015). There's little reason to believe that the sing-song rhymes Shelley crafted for the working class inspired any more collective action than the more complicated mythic poems.

At about the same time, I was recruited to join an emergent movement for nuclear disarmament because I had some activist commitments and experience. I turned away, explaining with what I'd like to describe as the confidence and eloquence of an English major that such a movement would never reach many people. Most people, I said, would not be

interested in a campaign about nuclear weapons, distant from their experiences. I had a piece of evidence: a local pacifist group held a vigil each weekend in the town square, reliably drawing turnouts in the single digits. Nuclear weapons were abstract, I declared, whereas poverty and hunger were real; the only movement that could take off, I decided, was about economic injustice. Two years later, one million people assembled in New York City demanding that the United States and the Soviet Union “freeze and reverse the arms race.”

So, I was just barely aware enough to realize that I was doubly wrong: wrong in thinking that studying literature was the best way to understand how to make the world better; wrong in thinking that my judgment about what could launch a movement was better than the systematically overly optimistic assessments of committed people who were ready to try to start something. I wanted to do better. I was unsatisfied with victories claimed as “moral” that didn’t change the real world. I wanted good information about what people were doing. I wanted to understand why the purposeful efforts of activists sometimes took off, and sometimes stayed on the margins. Perhaps most importantly, like the reporters, I wanted to know what worked to promote political change. And I wanted to be able to explain what I was learning to people unencumbered by a Ph.D.

### **THE PROMISE AND PERILS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE**

My penance and my quest led me to a doctoral program in political science. The promise was that by rigorous consideration of cases of protest movements that sometimes effected political change I could begin to develop a larger understanding of the patterns of political influence from below, and particularly, figure out what sorts of issues, tactics, slogans, and coalitions would promote social change. I wanted science to help. At the same time, I’d seen the enthusiasm and ambivalence about science that the Romantic writers I’d studied displayed. The classic Romantic image of science in my mind came from William Blake’s portrait of Isaac Newton, depicting the scientist naked, sitting on an algae covered rock at the bottom of a dark sea. Blake’s Newton has developed instruments and models to understand the world around him, and in deploying those tools had turned away from the very phenomena he meant to understand. The models were clean and bright, but reality was darker and less defined. Blake’s warned that in seeking to make sense of the world, scientists would crop out anything complicated, and distort what was in the frame of reference to make it intelligible. (It’s worth noting that such concerns have been expressed about the study of social movements in successive centuries, even by the most mathematically inclined of our community of scholars; see Oliver 1989).

We want rigor without reductionism; we want to describe the world around us, but to situate that description in a larger understanding of patterns. This continues to prove a difficult challenge for students of social movements. Newtonian physics, even considering Blake’s caricature, works pretty well. A basic scientific approach helps us understand not only why that imagined apple falls down, and not up, but also to predict the rate at which it will descend. Moreover, the principles underneath Newton’s physics give tools to those who could use them in order to achieve a range of desired outcomes, ranging from making a rocket produce enough thrust to escape the atmosphere to a pitcher learning how to make a baseball curve. Most of us can live a very full life without getting anywhere near the complexities of quantum theory. We would like the same menu of basic tools for those who promote social change: how to craft a slogan to maximize support; which issues are ripe for action; which alliances hurt the prospects for influence.

But the social world is obviously even more complicated than the physical one. Unlike physical and biological sciences on the other side of the campus, research on social movements doesn’t take place in laboratories where potentially confounding factors can be cordoned off from influence, real control groups can be contrasted with treatment groups, and initial results can face replication. Social movement research is about actions that take place

in the field, and it's a messy, variegated, and ~~constantly~~ ~~virtually always~~ changing field. In the trajectory of a social movement campaign, there are always multiple agentic actors with distinct and complicated motivations for action (Bernstein 1997), including activists, organizers, and authorities. Movements battle over matters of policy, but more generally about power and identity as well. As analysts and citizens, want to consider all of the odd causes and effects that go into creating collective action that might sometimes matter. At the same time, imposing a rigorous social science means filtering out a lot of what we think we know matters. There's a tension [in negotiating a balance](#) between rigor and reality.

Indeed, in thinking about contemporary events, the premises and findings of social science may even lead us astray. In elaborating an on-the-fly analysis of the Women's March, whose potential effectiveness was the most frequent question I got from students, neighbors, and journalists, I will show how the approaches we routinely use to assess influence can produce faulty analysis. I will offer some suggestions for work that needs to be done, and I will conclude with a call for us, scholars of social movements, to work harder to promote a better understanding of the complicated, often sloppy, and extended role that social protest plays in the political process.

#### **WILL THE WOMEN'S MARCH WORK? FRAMING MOVEMENTS, TIME, AND DEFINING OUTCOMES**

On January 21, 2017, the day after Donald Trump took the oath of office for the presidency and delivered a speech emphasizing his singular devotion to rectifying "American carnage," an estimated 500,000 people turned up on the Washington Mall, in conjunction with hundreds of sister marches across the country. The Crowd Counting Consortium<sup>3</sup> reports more than 650 demonstrations in the United States under the umbrella of the Women's March on that day, and more than 3.5 million participants—the largest single day demonstration recorded in American history; what's more, the project reports nearly 300 sympathy demonstrations elsewhere in the world.

The question of influence is an obvious one, not only for scholars or journalists, but also for the protesters who turned out in large numbers and the authorities they challenged. Although it's likely that demonstrators met friends, heard songs, and enjoyed good weather in some sites, the prime reason people come to an event like this is to try to make some kind of difference (Berry and Chenoweth 2018). But to figure out whether the movement worked or not, we've got to begin by setting objectives (dependent variables), defining the scope of the march (only Washington, DC?), and setting a time frame for effect. In each of these analytical decisions, the scholar can't help but distort the phenomena under consideration through cropping decisions—that is, deciding what gets left out of the analysis.

To begin with, we might start with the women's marches on the 21<sup>st</sup>, assessing goals from the march's website or from its participating groups. On principle, I would always start thinking about demands by looking at what the people participating thought they were demanding. But the march included more than 650 participating groups, each bringing a distinct set of sometimes overlapping goals, ranging from concern with reproductive rights to rights for indigenous people and for immigrants and for the disabled, plus concern for the environment and strong opposition to violence. Some goals were broad enough to resist achievement for at least the rest of our lifetimes, while others are more discrete. The marchers came with different priorities, unified largely in their identification of the new president as the prime opponent. And the day after the women's march, he remained in office. A failure? Or an unrealistic evaluation point?

Of all the groups and individuals engaged in the action, whose goals—sometimes mutually exclusive—should be identified as the critical ones to define influence? Moreover, the Women's March was hardly the only action targeted against the Trump administration—even that weekend, even in Washington, DC. The day before the big march, several hundred

DISRUPT-J20 demonstrators staged an unpermitted march which featured a few broken storefront windows, a vandalized limousine, and repeated skirmishes with police, ending with hundreds of arrests (Meyer and Tarrow 2018). That Friday evening, LGBT activists staged a Queer Dance Party outside the house Mike Pence, incoming vice president and longstanding foe of gay rights, had been staying. The dance party didn't feature broken windows, but colorful costumes and loud music (Meyer 2018). Although there may have been some overlap between the Queer Dance Partiers, Disrupt J-20ers, and Women's Marchers, these were three different groups employing different strategies in the service of distinct ultimate visions; they shared an antipathy to the incoming administration. How could you credibly sort out the relative influence of each of these events on a range of outcomes? Like most social movements, no one group, approach, or constituency enjoys complete control of a movement's direction, yet the efforts of allies can create a synergistic effect.

As always, activists can appropriately define both broad aspirations and proximate policy objectives, but in making assessments about influence, social scientists face tougher decisions: we want to avoid defining a goal or set of goals so broadly that they cannot be reliably assessed, but also not so narrowly as to avoid recognizing real influence. Should analysts define in advance the goals that seem possible and distinguish them from ones that are utopian? And what if articulating completely unrealistic goals is the only way to make progress on far more modest ones? Setting a time frame for evaluation is also inherently problematic. The five year old piano prodigy may start with the goal of playing in Carnegie Hall, but one practice session or recital is just a step on [a long](#) the road to that goal. The experienced teacher may be able to recognize progress, and to offer tips to speed the journey, but it's bound to be uneven and require persistence. Why would we think that changing the world would be simpler? Moreover, setting a reasonable time frame that is too narrow (say, stopping the construction of an energy plant within three years; see McAdam and Boudet 2012)<sup>4</sup>—understandable given that we want to be able to find and generate answers—risks missing the long and winding road to political change. Finally, even working social scientists approach their studies, particularly of contemporary movements, with their own political and social commitments, and are likely to create a kind of parallax view of the proximate and longer term outcomes of the objects of their study, finding alarm or comfort, perhaps inappropriately, in the ostensible influence of their subjects. It's too easy to find influence when seeking it and miss it when it's not what one wants to find.

The next critical framing question is one of setting a time frame not for outcomes, but for the origins of a campaign. The simple account of the Women's March starts just after Trump's election, when a previously inactive grandmother posted a call for a counter-inaugural demonstration on Facebook. More experienced activists took up the call, and making good use of the attention Trump had generated, put together a massive set of demonstrations in a matter of a few weeks (Berry and Chenoweth 2018). This origin story rehearses what Taylor (1989) describes as an "immaculate conception" myth familiar in descriptions of historic movements, which mystifies the extended and difficult work of organizing that animates movements.

A fuller picture of the origins of the Women's March finds not only precursors, but institutional connections everywhere. Trump's campaign rallies in 2016 faced routine counterdemonstrations, and more than occasionally, demonstrations within. Bernie Sanders's unsuccessful campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination had left a set of disappointed activists on the left end of the political spectrum. And going back before 2016, there are other precursors. The cause of immigration reform had been the subject of both dramatic civil disobedience and large demonstrations during the Obama administration—and Trump had repeatedly targeted immigrants in his campaign. Not far before that, the Black Lives Matter demonstrations had dotted American cities episodically from 2013 onward, staging protests against racialized police violence. And not too far before that, in the fall of 2011, an encampment near Wall Street in New York City, had spurred the creation of more than 600 Occupy sites across the United States, diverse in many respects, but generally

focused on political and economic inequality. Most Occupations were forcibly displaced in November of 2011, but the activists involved spilled out into numerous other more or less related campaigns, addressing issues like debt or the environment or eviction or health care. The precursor campaigns left in place cadres of experienced activists and a somewhat increased public awareness of a range of issues. In short, the movements of the immediate past made it easier for activists to organize the Women's March. Indeed, many of the national and local organizers had been involved in those movements (Meyer and Tarrow 2018).

It's not very difficult to trace the origins of the Women's March in particular and the anti-Trump Resistance more generally to the movements on the left visible during the Obama administration. But those campaigns all had their own progenitors and inspirations, and could be traced, through personnel, organizations, and ideas, to so many earlier political campaigns concerned with racism, sexism, environmental threats, and economic and political inequality. A fuller story could surely be extended back to suffrage or abolitionism, creating a kind of infinite regress in seeking a point of origin. Starting with the Women's March is coming late to the game, but how far back can you responsibly go in discussing a movement? And what is true of the Women's March is also true of all the major social movements in American history, which find organizational sponsors, ideational wellsprings, and trainers of activists in previous movements. Our cause, the Women's March, is itself, the effect of many earlier movements.

Tracing the history of activism and politics forward, it's hard to find discrete dependent variables that we could code as the unambiguous result of activism. At the same time, thinking about the events that followed, it's hard to imagine the trajectory of events that followed without the influence of the Women's March and the stream of activism it fed. The descriptions that follow outline a recent history in which activism from below played a role in setting the terms of the battle between the Trump administration and its opponents, one in which clear victories and defeats are hard to identify, for we see, instead, battles on the margins of policy and politics. In order to make sense of what happened, a rigorous analysis is dependent less on sophisticated analytical tools than on deep knowledge of the case at hand, one that affords the analyst access to counterfactual thinking (Bloom 2015): could these events have played out as they did without the presence of the Women's March?

The week after the Women's March, the Trump administration hastily and sloppily implemented a ban on travelers from 7 predominantly Muslim countries, elegantly described as "malevolence, tempered by incompetence (Wittes 2017)." Put into place on a Friday afternoon, with no warning to the public or to travelers, and no training or explanation to the immigration officials who would be administering it, the scenes at international airports across the country were chaotic. Contributing to the disruption were demonstrations at those airports; thousands of protesters turned up holding signs, with more than a few pink pussy hats dotting the crowds. Seemingly spontaneous, the protests were started by small groups of people linked by different groups in different cities. Publicizing both their protest and the sudden "Muslim ban" candidate Trump had promised on social media, the crowds increased over the days, with formal groups and some Democratic politicians endorsing the effort and showing up at the airports (Rosenberg 2017). Additionally, scores of lawyers appeared at the airports, holding placards offering *pro bono* legal help to travelers trapped in the confusion (Dorf and Chu 2018).

Does all of this happen without the already well-established efforts of activists organizing against Trump in and around the Women's March, offering criticisms, alternatives, public education, and building social networks and legitimacy? And think of what followed: The first version of the ban was immediately controversial inside and outside government. Unpopular within the Department of State, the ban was the subject of a dissent cable filed by officials within the bureaucracy. The idea of the dissent channel is to provide dissidents with ready access for expressing their commitments without disrupting the process of making and implementing public policy. Officially protected from retaliation, signatories nonetheless believe that they are taking a risk in airing criticisms of policy collectively. Still, the dissent

channel has been used to register dissent more than 100 times since first established in 1971. Fifty-one Foreign Service employees had registered dissent through a cable just over six months earlier, criticizing President Obama's failure to intervene in Syria to support democratic rebels, by far the largest number of signatories to date (Fisher 2016). This one was different: over 1,000 officers signed the dissent cable protesting the Muslim travel ban, by far the largest number of signatories to such a cable (Gettleman 2017). Here too, it's hard to imagine such a strong stance without the presence of a large and likely supportive social movement. It's far easier to imagine a bureaucrat struggling with the decision about whether to sign, coming across a stray pussy hat in a daughter's room—a detail that could surely be found as a bit of anecdotal evidence we're trained to dismiss.

The American Civil Liberties Union and the Council on American-Islam Relations filed lawsuits challenging the ban in federal court, something likely to have happened even without the large movement. But the Attorney General of Washington State, Bob Ferguson, an ambitious politician, also filed suit, knowing that there was a base of political support for his effort. Acting Attorney General Sally Yates, a career employee of the Justice Department, refused to defend the ban in court, reporting that she doubted it was Constitutional; she was fired. In a long profile, Yates makes no mention of public opinion or protest as influencing her decision, but she does report that she thought resigning, rather than waiting to be fired, would have done more to protect her reputation, and that she wanted to continue in public service (Lizza 2017). Inviting termination could look like a less damning career move given the political context. Again, it's easy to see a movement mattering in the shadows, but very difficult to find definitive scientific proof.

Days later, Federal Judge James Robart, appointed by George W. Bush more than a decade earlier, issued an injunction against implementing the ban, finding no rational basis for the policy. Judges aren't supposed to consider the size of the crowd or sincerity of protesters in the streets, only facts and the law, and Judge Robart's opinion and subsequent comments on the case made no mention of the protests. There was, however, some hint that the judge paid attention to social movements; in an earlier decision on a case brought by the Federal government against Seattle's police department, charging excessive violence, Robart's ruling included the words, "Black Lives Matter." (Melvin 2017). The ban went through several rounds of modification and years of litigation before a version passed Constitutional muster with the Supreme Court, but the struggle spilled well outside the boundaries of the legal system, as Trump—and his allies—ridiculed judges who ruled against various versions of the ban, calling into question their legitimacy. The conflict itself fed the opposition to Trump on a range of other issues, some of which were not necessarily high on the Women's March agenda.

The first demonstrations, along with adverse judicial decisions and all sorts of public criticism, affected national discourse. At once, they helped produce an unusually politicized environment, where the Trump administration's policies received a level of attention and scrutiny they might have otherwise avoided. Criticism and contestation consistently provoked Trump, who responded to virtually every slight, chastising "so-called" judges for being appointed by Democrats or serving far away. Trump criticized journalists for being terrible people interested only in bringing him down by producing "fake news." He hung derogatory nicknames on his political opponents, inside and outside government, offering almost exclusively *ad hominem* criticisms, and eventually unleashed the same criticisms on his own administration. In effect, the protests trolled the president, inviting engagement and creating opportunities for escalation and for mistakes—and the administration produced plenty of them.

The weeks following the first travel ban saw both a steady stream of demonstrations in Washington, DC, and eruptions of activism across the United States focused on local mobilization. Considering first the national demonstrations, we know that public assembly, often in large crowds, in the nation's capital is a well-established routine element of American politics (Barber 2002). At the same time, the procession of parades and protests in



Washington felt relentless, including national demonstrations for reproductive rights, for immigrants, LGBTQ pride, for women, for science, against the Dakota Access Pipeline, for action on climate change, for truth, for tax justice. All of these demonstrations were echoed and amplified by local efforts, civil disobedience actions, and imaginative tracking of Trump's travel when he left the White House for respite at one of his properties. Local demonstrations also engaged a broader range of concerns, including police violence, Confederate monuments, and school funding.

The local campaigns spurred the creation of a new infrastructure comprised of loose national networks which provided guidance, encouragement, and some national visibility, even as groups set their own priorities and planned their own actions, a model of activism described as "distributed organizing" (Fisher 2019). Animated largely by middle-aged women, many of whom had not previously been heavily engaged in politics, the groups met online and in private homes, staging protests and coordinating local electoral campaigns (Andrews, Caren, and Browne 2018; Gose and Skocpol 2019; Putnam 2020; Putnam and Skocpol 2018a, b). Perhaps most notable was Indivisible, a group that started as an online guide to pragmatic civic activism drafted by two former Democratic Congressional aides (Brooker 2018). Although the guide was not intended to become an organization itself, the rise of local activism created both a demand for coordination and a national face, as well as resources to support the effort. Local groups often focused on campaigns for city or state offices, and subsequent elections to Congress, but they were hardly insular and ecological units. The national profile amplified their efforts, making it a little easier to recruit and direct members, and to claim victories. The movement and institutional politics influenced each other, in ways similar to the mutual influence of the local and national campaigns (Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa 2021).

Republicans' proposed repeal of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) proved a test case for the growing movement, and the battle would provide a window on the influence of the activism highlighted by the Women's March. Repeal was a recurrent Republican campaign promise from the moment the Act passed in 2011, and Republican-led houses of Congress repealed the bill dozens of times during the Obama administration without having to craft alternatives or exit strategies. As the repeal percolated in Congress, Republican legislators were deluged with calls orchestrated by local and national opposition groups, a level of engagement that even exceeded the calls generated by the Tea Party seeking to prevent the Act's passage in the first place. Local activists staged town meetings to discuss their health care concerns, which Republican representatives mostly avoided. Absent official meetings, activists demonstrated outside local and national offices and showed up at other planned events. Republican legislators were unable to agree on a replacement for the ACA, and crafted an alternative strategy: repeal the existing system and then, with the pressure of a national crisis, hope to negotiate an alternative. This "skinny" repeal narrowly passed in the House of Representatives, without the votes of 20 Republican legislators. In the Senate, however, after an extensive and tortured debate that extended deep into the night, three Republicans defied the president and the majority leader to kill repeal. It's noteworthy that the Trump Resistance succeeded in stopping the initiatives of their prime target, outstripping the early achievements of the Tea Party—which failed to stop passage of the Affordable Care Act in the first place. But even as the ACA remained, it would face continued efforts to erode its support and popularity in the following years.

How can we assess whether any part of the demonstrations, town hall meetings, phone calls, and emails actually affected the ultimate outcome? When we look at the course of the repeal bill, we can find far too many factors explaining its defeat. The Republican leadership in the House made tactical errors in constructing a repeal it had campaigned on for almost a decade, putting together an interim plan for approval that they promised someone else would fix, and rushed consideration to avoid allowing the Congressional Budget Office to offer an analysis (Berman 2017). Legislators were buffeted by conservative media and grassroots activists who variously demanded lower costs, protection for preexisting conditions, and free

market reforms. Unsurprisingly, the legislation couldn't deliver on the widely divergent promises Republican candidates for office had made for it in the previous decade. The bill was poorly drafted, and dependent upon yet unspecified actions after passage to head off what even its most staunch supporters acknowledged would be a disaster. It was, understandably, extremely unpopular; on the eve of the vote, the Republican plan enjoyed the support of only 17 percent of Americans (Quinnipiac 2017). The outcome was overdetermined—at least in retrospect.

Of course, the playing field of American politics virtually always advantages the defense, that is, the forces opposed to some kind of change (Meyer 2015). Democrats were unified in opposition, relished campaigning against it, and enthusiastically unleashed their own polemics. "Make no mistake, people will die as a result of this bill," said Florida Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz of Florida (Berman 2017). None of these factors were independent of each other or from the intensive oppositional campaign staged by the Trump resistance. Republican promises and political predicaments were subjected to unusual attention, and negotiations among the majority became ever more contested. The grassroots activism made it easier for Democrats to hold a strong line. And coverage of all these developments fed public opposition to the bill—and stoked the movement. While Republican legislators were understandably loathe to credit the grassroots opposition with stalling their agenda, Democratic leaders credited their mobilized base. Nancy Pelosi, leader of the Democratic minority in the House, claimed credit for her caucus, while simultaneously shouting out to the grassroots activists, summarizing, "The unity we had internally, combined with the outside mobilization, really made this success possible" (Martin 2017).

So, as scholars of social movements can we consider this a victory? On the one hand, a massive grassroots effort was mostly successful in defending a program whose abolition Republicans had publicly proclaimed a key priority. But in stalling Republican priorities, the groups derived no new recognition or advantages (cf. Gamson 1990) for themselves or their nation; they just stopped things from getting much worse very quickly. Their achievement could not be measured in terms of policy reforms or public spending, or even the quality of health. Sometimes, a stalemate is a victory, but marking that decision on a scorecard is only possible through a good understanding of the politics of the moment and a particular issue. Moreover, social scientists familiar with the case would recognize the impossibility of treating any of these co-occurring variables as independent, or sorting out the relative weight of any one. There's no political universe to use as comparison or even control that one could use in testing a hypothesis. To be sure, there's a story of movement influence, but one that's hard to squeeze into the constraints of what we normally define as rigorous social science.

### PATTERNED MISSTEPS

Training in social science can actually lead us astray in making sense of the current moment, whether it be the moment described above in 2017, the ongoing campaigns for and against gun safety regulation, the recent cluster of demonstrations against racialized police violence, or the more recent right wing invasion of the Capitol. The quest for rigor and parsimony leads us to frame the objects of each study as narrowly as possible, factoring out extraneous elements that might confuse or distort an answer. In seeking recurrent patterns across time and setting, and seeking to discern familiar trajectories, we make patterned [analytical](#) mistakes of [analysis](#).

#### *Misplaced Models*

Activists, analysts, and bystanders all know at least a few cases of collective action, and always want to use their knowledge of the past to make sense of the present. But picking the right case isn't always obvious, and activists come to a campaign with wildly different goals

on so many different issues that a single model doesn't make sense. Furthermore, the events that activists claim to find inspirational are not necessarily those that offer useful models for understanding their efforts. Occupy Wall Street activists took heart and took to the streets in the fall of 2011, partly encouraged by the popular movement for democratic reforms in Egypt's chapter in Arab Spring, dramatically expressed by mass protests in Tahrir Square. But the Egyptian protesters were trying to oust an authoritarian regime, and anxiously waiting for the military to come to their aid by turning on an autocratic leader (Hartman 2012). To be sure, it's completely understandable to find inspiration and comfort in the actions of brave people taking risks in very difficult circumstances in order to promote values that might seem compatible with your own. But there was little about the way in which the Egyptian transition played out that was remotely applicable to Occupy. Yet the demonstrations and occupations about cuts in government services and political and economic inequality that took place in Madison, Wisconsin and in Tel-Aviv, Israel, received very little attention—although their aims and their circumstances were far more relevant to Occupy.

We retreat to familiar models, even if the lessons they teach may be irrelevant or even misleading. None is perhaps more appealing than that of Rosa Parks, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the larger civil rights movement. In a popular variant, Parks's refusal to move to the back of a bus is portrayed as a spontaneous move by a tired seamstress upended legal segregation in short order and unleashed a powerful, morally-driven, non-violent civil rights movement that won legal reforms in short order. The lessons taken from such a story mystify the process of protest and of social change. The tired old lady Rosa Parks story is frequently debunked (e.g., Theoharis 2005), but notions that a singular act of courage can tip the balance of power still persist.

Moreover, even a fuller understanding of Parks's long activist history and her prominent role in a moment of a much longer and more complicated movement doesn't necessarily provide insights into understanding what is likely to work for other social movements. Yet animal rights activists, citing a concern for humanity and non-violence, suggest there are lessons to be learned from Parks's defiance on a bus (Hsuing 2016), and Stephen Moore, a conservative polemicist and adviser to Trump administration, likened the protesters against public health quarantines to the iconic civil rights activist. "I call these people the modern-day Rosa Parks, he announced, "they are protesting against injustice and a loss of liberties" (Carlisle 2020; Moore 2020). Such pronouncements reflect differing portions of audacity and ignorance.

Academics also try to find a recipe for social change in the civil rights movement that can be transferred to other social movements, including those for animal rights, against war (e.g. McAdam and Su 2002), for environmental protection, or against taxation. But the policies being contested and the levers authorities can use to exercise influence are distinct, limited to a policy and to a time. The civil rights movement in its heyday contested policies of legal segregation and economic inequality, making far less progress on the latter. It flourished in the wake of a Supreme Court decision about public schools in a moment when the United States had foreign policy interests in taking forceful action on racial inequality (Dudziak 2000). The federal government enjoyed substantial advantages in battling state governments to comply with its initiatives. In contrast, animal rights activists challenge not only Big Agriculture, but also individual consumption choices in a market economy. There is no evident foreign policy advantage for the federal government if citizens eat less meat or scientists stop using animals in experiments or circuses. Antiwar activists confront a policy domain largely governed by the Executive branch of government, in which members of Congress, much less local officials, rarely exercise much influence, and political initiatives are affected by the actions of other countries. Moreover, the Executive enjoys a distinct advantage in making policies in areas that are generally low information and low salience for most citizens. The point is that importing a model that produced a desired outcome for one movement on a particular set of claims in a distinct place and time is unlikely to provide

reliable counsel for understanding or influencing movements on different issue areas or operating in different contexts.

The models should vary to account for not only the nature of the claims being advanced, but the differential resources groups bring to the political battle, including money, residual support, intensity of commitment, status, and the character of their opponents. Look, for example, at the politics of what Rottem Sagi (2016) calls the pro-Israel movement in the United States, which faces no strong organized opposition in the United States and is sufficiently well-funded to manage substantial internal differences effectively. In contrast, Laschever (2017; Laschever and Meyer 2021) notes the gross asymmetry between the gun safety movement and its gun rights opponents. The existence of a well-funded and well-organized rival, represented by the National Rifle Association, means that gun safety activists are essentially forced to try to take advantage of every opportunity to present their claims publicly, frequently in the wake of a mass shooting, while their opponent can pick its places more strategically, retreating from public engagement at unfavorable moments. The point here is that useful analysis of movement opportunities and choices must assess both context and contingencies, making the export of any simple model problematic.

The issue of context is particularly vexing when movements are organized around ascriptive identities, particularly racial or ethnic identities, rather than belief. Although there is extensive literature on movements focused on ethnic, racial, and sexual minorities, our existing theory ~~about them~~ mostly ignores the distinct opportunities, strictures, and dilemmas such movements face (Bracey 2016). It's critical to consider the ways in which national political actors and factors condition the definition of a constituency's identity as well as its grievances and prospects for mobilization and organization (Furuyama and Meyer 2011), and to see how far smaller contexts, like a college campus, also affect grievances and mobilization strategies (Reyes 2015, 2018).

#### *Narrow Fields of Action*

In ideal type normal science, the investigator identifies and isolates variables of interest to examine their relative impact on a particular specified outcome. Absent a laboratory, however, social scientists recognize that despite their best analytical efforts, even with sophisticated statistical models, neither isolation of potential causal factors, nor real world replication is really possible. We know that the real world of a vital social movement includes different organizations, working in more or less harmonious action, along with individuals outside—and often inside—government and other institutions, pursuing a variety of goals in many different ways. To measure movements, scholars focus on an aspect or two of a social movement, for example events (e.g. Soule and Earl 2005), tactics (Boutcher and McCammon 2018; Wang and Soule 2016), organizations (e.g. McCarthy and Zald 1977; Kretschmer 2019; Minkoff 1994), individuals (e.g. Corrigan-Brown 2012; Fisher 2019; Robnett 1997; Whittier 1995), constituencies (Pullum 2016; Reyes 2018) specific policies (e.g., Amenta 2006; McCammon 2015; Pullum 2016; Rohlinger 2015), or rhetoric (e.g., Polletta 2009; Benford and Snow 2000). But a tight analytical focus must nonetheless avoid cutting out other forces that also influence the origins, development, and proximate and ultimate outcomes of protest movements.

It's convenient to define a social movement by *a* constituency (*the* women's movement, e.g.) or *a* claim (e.g. *the* environmental movement), but not only is there diversity within each, there are also fluid boundaries between movements on the same general side of the political spectrum (Meyer and Whittier 1994). Anti-tax crusaders may also work against legal abortion; feminist activists can also crusade against war. Establishing hard analytical boundaries between movements that often include overlapping organizations and individuals can make a sort of scientific sense, yet nonetheless offer an overly limited of the process of politics we want to understand, where movements can produce unanticipated outcomes outside of the field they explicitly target.

The focus on one element of movements which are often extremely broad and diverse risks focusing on the wrong part of a story, ascribing success or failure to a lobbying campaign while ignoring the mass demonstrations and isolated acts of civil disobedience that often accompany and affect it. In the early 1980s, for example, the movement against the nuclear arms race included: 1) radical Catholic activists who poured their own blood on missile nosecones and documents at a General Electric factory that produced guidance systems for a nuclear weapons system; 2) a movie about the [subsequent ensuing](#) trial; 3) a mass campaign for a “nuclear freeze” that featured referenda campaigns, petitions, and lobbying; 4) large demonstrations, featuring activist speakers and popular musicians; 5) electoral support for sympathetic Congressional candidates; 6) allied artists staging fundraisers and concerts; and 7) former government officials and academic experts publishing articles offering new arms control ideas. This inventory is, of course, partial. By the end of the decade, Democrats had made substantial gains in Congress, but Ronald Reagan—the movement’s chief target—was reelected in a landslide. The arms control process was restored, and the arms race continued, albeit in a more restrained manner (Meyer 1990). Distinct actions were staged by activists with different goals—ending militarism and war on one end of the spectrum; restoring some semblance of arms control on the other. The resulting changes in policy were more than what some activists saw as possible, and not nearly enough to respond to the concerns of others. And while these actions were staged independently, it’s impossible to say they didn’t affect each other. Dramatic dissent on the margins raised issues that opened space within political institutions; defections by mainstream actors underscored a sense of grievance and of possibility for activists at the grassroots. It’s both impractical and inappropriate to sort out the effects of any one set of actions when they occurred more or less simultaneously and affected each other. Moreover, activist efforts can have effects not only less or more than what activists intend, but just different: politicizing activists, building social networks, or creating artistic work.

Sorting out the differential impact of a [passel of](#) different loosely allied groups draws our attention to the coalition organizational form that characterizes virtually all social movements in America (Brooker and Meyer 2018; Corrigan-Brown and Meyer 2011; Sagi 2016; Pullum 2020; Van Dyke and McCammon 2010). Effective social movements need to contain diverse claims, claimants, and approaches to social change (Kretschmer 2009); coalitions among organizations are one way to contain and manage diversity, but there is often great diversity within organizations as well (Kretschmer 2019).

### *Evaluating Real Possibilities*

Although organizers need to maintain an overarching sense of possibility about their efforts (Gamson and Meyer 1996), analysts are not similarly constrained. In American politics, the activists who want to stall some unwanted change operate at an advantage compared to those who want to promote something new. Those who want to pursue comprehensive changes, say ending capitalism, the consumption of animal products, or the production of carbon, face a steeper climb than those who want tighter regulations for medical treatments or to stop the construction of low-income housing nearby. Even the prospects of moving toward those more modest goals will be affected by partisan alignments, the presence of allies in government, allied campaigns in other countries, and even unanticipated events, which all change over time (Meyer 2004). A meaningful understanding of the effects of agency is only possible if we understand the constraints at work in a particular case. But this is no easy matter.

It would be hard for even the most clairvoyant academic to predict the growing acceptance of same sex marriages in 1983, when Evan Wolfson (1983), a visionary law student, wrote a paper that found a Constitutional basis for marriage equality. Decades of organizing producing the full range of social movement actions, and changing global norms—partly a reflection of that organizing—changed the world such that the possible also changed.

Over time, activists framed their claims differently, trying to find the pitch and connections that would make the claim resonate with the politics of the moment (see McCammon 2015). Analysts have the responsibility of assessing a movement's achievements against a realistic scale of what's possible, without really knowing what's possible.

A critical issue is assessing the evaluation of protesters and their causes by a variety of audiences. Organizers wrestle with getting good attention—~~for~~ their organizations, their grievances and remedies, and their activities. For years, the basic question was about getting coverage in mainstream media, which was a route to reaching a broader audience (see Amenta et al. 2009; Rohlinger 2015), building capacity and credibility with journalists in order to be able to gain attention in defining events (Evans 2016; Gamson 1988; Coulter and Meyer 2015). But social media have radically changed the landscape for organizing. Activists may no longer need mainstream media to reach a broad audience, and may not need to reach a broad audience at all. Partisan media provide a route to reaching potential allies (Laschever 2017b) and a variety of channels on social media have provided a more efficient way of reaching other activists than older style meetings, canvasses or telephone trees, offering a new balance of advantages and vulnerabilities (Rohlinger and Bunnage 2019; Tufekci 2017). We now need to understand how activists build credibility with distinct audiences, as well as how they gain attention in the first place (Meyer and Bourdon 2020).

#### *Evaluating Institutionalization*

The founders designed American political institutions to absorb many dissenting constituencies and movements, offering frequent elections at many levels of government, but making it difficult for anyone to effect reforms in policy (Meyer 2015). As a result, it's easy—and sometimes appropriate—to view winning electoral office, the creation of a dedicated agency, or establishing a stable organizational presence as achievements—or as a distraction or even an obstacle—as either “stumbling blocks or stepping stones” (Evans 2015). It's possible to track the election of individuals with some kind of expressed association with a social movement, often a demographic connection, the establishment of stable organizations, the movement of ideas from the margins to the mainstream, the adoption of policies in government and in other institutions (Banaszak 2009), the funding of programs, or the recognition of ideas or actors in mainstream media, but those are not really independent outcomes (e.g. Amenta, Caren, Olasky, and Stobaugh 2009; Evans 2016; Meyer and Minkoff 2004; Wasow 2020). Rather, there is a process through which movements achieve change ~~in~~ through steps, although the patterns of influence are quite likely to differ across movements. Declaring one sort of outcome a victory is understandable, but it provides only a glimpse of the more complicated process of social change. This challenge is particularly salient when considering the recognition of elected officials demographically associated with a movement, for example Black, Latino, female, or openly gay legislators. Although these outcomes are surely an achievement of sorts, and a signal to others, they don't necessarily mark substantial changes in opportunities for others with the same demographic characteristics. A fuller analysis requires situating the steps of social change for a particular movement in a kind of sequence that discerns the influence of different sorts of political institutionalization.

#### *Truncated Time*

When we tell fuller stories of social movements, we can't escape the recognition that the prehistory of the events we study sets up the possibility of those events taking place altogether; further, social movement outcomes extend over time in unpredictable ways. Policy changes, often examined as a response to protest, also depend upon critical events, support from government officials, the strength of efforts of an organized opposition—often in a movement form (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996) and the continued support of interest groups or movement organizations. A shortened time scale deployed in social science analysis of

social movements, calibrated in days, months, or quite a few years, is understandable if we mean to draw causal links between a set of movement actions to outcomes, but assessing appropriate timelines for influence is far from obvious. Analysis must be cropped in a limited time frame which necessarily omits factors that matter to both the origins and outcomes of a movement. The time frame is particularly critical in distinguishing setbacks, which can be temporary or even productive from apparent defeats (Boutcher 2011; Fetner 2008). Moreover, there is a complicated back and forth between challengers and their opponents which is difficult to anticipate or to theorize. Certainly, ideas, images, and actors that emerge in what looks like a loss, can remain on the political field long enough to see subsequent victories. Evans (2016) shows that animal rights groups can win visibility and even legitimacy for their ideas over time by staging outrageous actions that are ridiculed in the moment. Similarly, Wasow (2020) finds that disruptive racial justice activists can alienate potential supporters in the moment, but “seed” ideas that are later picked up by others. We can’t see these more complicated processes unless we adopt a somewhat flexible approach to looking at time.

#### ANALYSIS ON THE FLY IS CONTINUAL

All the pitfalls presented for making sense of a movement’s emergence, trajectory, and ultimate influence are multiplied without the benefit of historical perspective, that is, analyzing a movement’s likely impact while it is in movement. It’s hard to get a good sense of the roots and composition of a movement in process, much less its ultimate outcome, which will be determined by so many unknowns: the strategic choices activists make about what they do, who they work with—or exclude; the responses of opponents, who may repress, ignore, and try to welcome their challengers; the reactions of bystanders, who may join in—or just stand by; and the whole set of outside events, from natural disasters to artistic products that may cloud or clarify the fields. Further, movement efforts can affect influence on the policies they target directly, to be sure, but also indirectly, through the individuals recruited, politicized, and pushed into other sorts of politics.

Most generally, effective protest movements draw attention to political issues, mobilize supporters—and often opponents, intensify commitments, stiffening the spine of institutional allies while challenging opponents, inviting mistakes. They encourage others to take action by suggesting urgency and the possibility of influence, and they polarize, pushing people to engage and take sides. We can see all of this happening in the aftermath of the Women’s March and the ensuing resistance. We can also see unforeseen consequences in the history that followed the initial draft of this article.

At the outset of this paper, I reviewed a reasonable case that the anti-Trump Resistance played a role in stopping the repeal of the Affordable Care Act, even though its preservation was only a small part of the broader movement’s major concerns. That battle, animated by grassroots groups and claimed by virtually everyone involved, provided both an inspiration and a focus for Democratic candidates for office seeking to reverse Republican electoral gains over the previous decade. But that wasn’t all: In early 2018, following a mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglass High School in Parkland, Florida, student survivors massed social media to launch a campaign for gun safety. Charismatic and clever teens provided a new face to an already well-established issue and an institutionalized movement. The Parkland students commanded national attention and pressed a focus on gun control, lobbying in Tallahassee and in Washington DC, staging a mass demonstration in Washington that was covered live on television, and spurring a round of high school walk-outs for gun control. They won few policy victories, but a bill that would provide universal concealed carry that had already passed in the Republican House of Representatives never reached the floor of the US Senate—a stalemate that represented a victory. The students organized a bus tour over the summer and fall that focused on voter registration. This too fed into the stunning electoral results for the Democratic Party.<sup>5</sup>

Democratic candidates claiming inspiration from the Women's March won several seats in Virginia's House of Delegates in 2017, and Democrats ran to take back the House of Representatives with a focus on protecting and extending health insurance. In 2018, Democrats regained control of the House of Representatives, winning 40 seats. It's hard to imagine all of this without the activism in the streets—and elsewhere. It's also hard to sort out the relative impact of the range of different factors at play in protest and in politics.

After the electoral gains of 2018, Democrats used their new institutional advantage to focus sharper scrutiny on the Trump administration, nourishing a resistance that now included a stronger mainstream political wing. The developing presidential campaign, beginning with the contest for the Democratic nomination, soaked up a great deal of attention, as well as Resistance energy, activists, and money. The crowded field of hopefuls included two candidates, Senators Elizabeth Warren (Massachusetts) and Bernie Sanders (Vermont), whose focus and rationale echoed the ideas of combating political and economic inequality, advanced by the Occupy movement seven years earlier.

Under normal circumstances, the presidential race would claim most attention and the focus of funders, activists, and bystanders (see Blee and Currier 2006). The public health, economic, and political crises that followed the global pandemic from a novel corona virus, COVID-19, changed what was possible. Quarantines in large cities shut down not only social and economic life, but also political protest—for a while. Protests against restrictions on social and economic activity occurred first, largely monopolized by conservative activists, followed by relief in those restrictions in most places (Maresca and Meyer 2020).

Then, suddenly, a video circulated widely on social media showing a Minneapolis police officer kneeling on the throat of George Floyd for nearly nine minutes. Floyd, suspected of passing a counterfeit \$20 bill, was killed while pleading for mercy [as while](#) other officers looked on. Protests against racialized police violence erupted across the country, and even around the world, producing what has already been tagged as the as the largest, broadest, and most covered political protests in American history (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel 2020; Putnam, Chenoweth, and Pressman 2020; Heaney 2020). Social scientists can usefully deploy concepts of resources, opportunities, frames, and emotions to describe the extraordinary spread of this campaign, but none of those perspectives could have predicted it. Moreover, protests on different issues provided an infrastructure for a more diverse crowd to support Black Lives Matter, the most recent iteration of a movement against state violence directed at Black people. The recent round of protests drew widespread public support from white as well as Black people, both in public opinion polls and in the streets (Parker, Horowitz, and Anderson 2020; Stewart 2020; Washington 2020). Resistance protest in the early part of the Trump administration helped polarize opinion, and many people, particularly young people, were ready to take a stand with Black Lives Matter—and against Trump—when the opportunity presented, targeting not only police violence, but symbols of racism elsewhere in society.

The 2020 round of protests seemed to work incredibly quickly as well. The officer who strangled George Floyd was indicted for murder, an extremely unusual charge to be [lodged](#) [filed](#) against a police officer, filed with unusual speed, and followed by indictments of the 3 officers who stood by while it happened. Some police departments announced reforms, notably banning officers from using chokeholds on people they detained, and the House of Representatives passed a comprehensive bill to combat police violence. Local officials announced that they would remove statues of Confederate war heroes, and military leaders announced that they would welcome the opportunity to consider renaming bases named after Confederates. NASCAR banned the display of the Confederate flag, professional baseball and football teams publicly reexamined names that represented ethnic slurs against indigenous people, and the state of Mississippi decided to remake its state flag to remove the symbol of the Confederacy.

An obvious question for the social scientist is why these protests seemed to work, while earlier protests: for Black Lives Matter starting in 2013 or against the Confederate flag and statues, starting in 2015, or against offensive team names since the 1970s didn't seem to be so



effective. An attentive observer, however, would note that the prior protests created a kind of loading effect that advanced a cause without winning many immediate victories; but made it easier for the next round of protests to effect influence. In retrospect, it's clear that the earlier campaigns made a sort of not quite invisible progress ~~less visibly~~, advancing a cause without notching easily identifiable victories.

The protests of 2020, in conjunction with Donald Trump's electoral loss—a defeat he refused to acknowledge or accept, also changed the context for political protest. On January 6, the day Congress was scheduled to count and accept Electoral College votes from the states, a rally addressed by Trump and his allies, led to a march and an invasion of the Capitol building which resulted in multiple deaths, extensive property damage, and a delay in the electoral outcome. Investigation of the invasion is ongoing, but it is clear that some marchers, embedded in white nationalist groups, arrived in Washington intending to invade the building and harass, capture, or even kill their political enemies in Congress. The far right had benefitted in the Trump era: from the rhetorical support from the president and his allies, and from the legitimization of its claims against immigrants, liberals, Jews, and Blacks. Building on longstanding networks, the movement responded to the provocation of Trump's impending exit from office. For a brief time, the disruption and subsequent effects challenged the unity of the Republican coalition (Snyder 2021).

In all of these cases, earlier activists provided a foundation and often imagination, sometimes not immediately visible to later iterations of activists, who didn't have to reach quite so far to achieve their aims. We presently lack the theoretical and methodological tools to model and test such developments, at least within the constraints of academic journal articles. And I fear that in seeking to develop them we may end up enacting Blake's Newton, turning away from what we seek to understand to fiddle with our tools.

### WHAT IS TO BE DONE

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Social science should help us understand and affect the world in which we live, but only if we look beyond the boundaries of the profession, using rather than idolizing the methods and theories that make for good journal articles. It means looking deeply into the cases we mean to explain; and recognizing their contours and contingencies. Experience in making sense of past movements should help us in analyzing today's campaigns, and theory should help us know what to look at. Those of us who try to make sense of the world must accept the obligations that come with that vocation-identity. The demands of scholarship are to pursue questions that are actually worth answering, that is, whose honest answer brings some social significance. We are called to try to pursue and report the truth with all the rigor and honesty we can muster. I think we must also embrace humility—or at least acknowledge some uncertainty—in making assessments or predictions about current matters.

We need to ask the questions that animate activists and observers as well as academics, and pursue answers as well as arguments, even as we look to identify larger patterns of social change. But such efforts are doomed to a relevance that is academic only in the worst sense unless we remember to keep an eye on the world we mean to explain as well as the lenses we deploy in looking at it. In focusing on a piece of a social movement story, we can't ignore the social, political, and temporal context in which it plays out. ~~B~~While good scientific practice encourages us to focus tightly, narrowing the temporal and activist frame for a clear view. But, to the degree that we engage in public education, in the classroom, certainly, but also in writing for audiences not limited to academics, it's our job to stretch the boundaries of that frame, to tell somewhat longer and more complicated stories, including more in our field of vision, and to find ways to tell those stories in compelling ways.

In thinking about influence, we need to spend serious effort in understanding how a particular episode in contentious politics came to be, appreciating without overvaluing present events that are only possible because of previous ones. There is an unfortunate, but

understandable, tendency to assume that the policy debate that most closely follows a protest in time is most likely to be affected by that protest. Inference of simple causality based on proximity in time (temporal proximity) is an obvious analytical error. But the last straw only breaks the camel's back only when it follows many other straws that may be heavier, broader, and dropped with more force.

### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For example, David S. Meyer, "A 'Good' Protester is Just a 'Bad' Protester in the Misty Rearview Mirror," *The Washington Post*, June 5, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/06/05/good-protesters-bad-protesters/>; "Social Distance and Social Movements During COVID-19," Union of Concerned Scientists blog, April 20, 2020, <https://blog.ucsusa.org/science-blogger/social-movements-during-covid-19>; "A global explosion of people power?" *The Big Q*, December 4, 2019, <https://www.thebigq.org/2019/12/04/a-global-explosion-of-people-power/>; "3 ways activist kids these days resemble their predecessors." *The Conversation*, March 8, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/3-ways-activist-kids-these-days-resemble-their-predecessors-112502>

<sup>2</sup> Reprinted in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, March 11, 2019, <https://www.sfchronicle.com/news/article/3-ways-activist-kids-these-days-resemble-their-13672843.php>; "One year after the Parkland shooting, is the #NeverAgain movement on track to succeed?" *The Washington Post, The Monkey Cage*, February 14, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2019/02/14/one-year-after-the-parkland-shooting-is-the-neveragain-movement-on-track-to-succeed/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.81a355e1490c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2019/02/14/one-year-after-the-parkland-shooting-is-the-neveragain-movement-on-track-to-succeed/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.81a355e1490c)

<sup>3</sup> "The Parkland Teens Started Something. How Can It Become a Social Movement?" *The Washington Post, Outlook: Perspective*, April 13, 2018; "Did the Women's March Matter? Does it Still?" KCET January 20, 2018, <https://www.kcet.org/news-analysis/did-the-womens-march-matter-does-it-still>

<sup>4</sup> PB Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," was written in 1821, but first published posthumously in 1840. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69388/a-defence-of-poetry>

<sup>5</sup> [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1xa0iLqYKz8x9Yc\\_rhthmSOIQ2EGeUVjvV4A8LsIaxY/htmlview#gid=0](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1xa0iLqYKz8x9Yc_rhthmSOIQ2EGeUVjvV4A8LsIaxY/htmlview#gid=0)

<sup>4</sup> Kriesi, Hutter, and Bojar (2019) offer an innovative strategy for identifying contentious episodes that comprise somewhat extended interactions. See also the comments following (Tarrow et al. 2019).

<sup>5</sup> The Parkland effort also effected influence far beyond the United States, inspiring a young climate activist, Greta Thunberg, who found the courage to start a school strike movement that spanned the globe (Watts 2019). Certainly, the students who focused initially on changing Florida's gun laws could not have imagined this outcome.

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