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Claiming Credit: The Social Construction of Movement Success

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Protesters who gathered outside the Democratic Party's national convention this summer in Los Angeles launched some of their efforts from Pershing Square, a prime downtown location midway between the financial district and the jewelry district, not far from the Staples Convention Center. The selection of this site, over the objections of the Democratic Party's leadership, the Los Angeles police, and downtown business interests, can be largely attributed to the efforts of one person, Los Angeles City Councilwoman Jackie Goldberg. When Mayor Richard Riordan, unable to raise the money necessary for the convention independently, asked the City Council for \$4 million, Councilwoman Goldberg, claiming affinity with the protesters, used her position as a swing vote to extract concessions, not the least of these being the choice location for free speech protesters (Newton 2000).

Media reports emphasized Goldberg's savvy bargaining skills-or her intransigence, and her ongoing rivalries with the mayor. Importantly, however, although the change in policy was seen to be helpful to the protesters, the decision itself was portrayed as Goldberg's individual accomplishment. In none of the reports were Goldberg's own political affiliations portrayed. She had, in fact, extensive experience as an activist long before coming to the City Council, having participated in the feminist and civil rights movements and having served as a student leader during the Free Speech Movement at the University of California-Berkeley. Before running for City Council she had been active and visible in the campaign to desegregate Los Angeles schools, and in the gay and lesbian movement.<sup>(2)</sup> Although Goldberg's career as an elected official is at least partly a product of her activism in several of the major movements of the past thirty-five years, her connections with those movements of the past received no attention in the mass media. Her victories and defeats are seen as her own, the results of a committed or cantankerous individual, not the longer term achievements of the movement against the war in Vietnam or the Berkeley Free Speech Movement.

The career of Representative John Lewis, a Democratic member of the United States House of Representatives from Georgia, provides a strong counterpoint. A contemporary of Goldberg, Lewis was the national chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and was a brave and visible leader during the hey-day of the civil rights movement. During his first campaign for Congress, both he and his opponent, Julian Bond, stressed their backgrounds in the civil rights movement. And after nearly 14 years in Congress, Lewis still emphasizes his activist experience nearly forty years earlier. On his own web site, for example, Lewis's biography begins, "Described as 'one of the most courageous persons the Civil Rights Movement ever produced,' John Lewis has dedicated his life to protecting human rights, securing personal dignity and building what he calls 'The Beloved Community'" (<http://www.house.gov/johnlewis/bio.html>). The language is telling, for Lewis portrays his own considerable political career as an achievement of the civil rights movement-and in this, he is in good company. The election of a black man to represent Georgia in the United States Congress itself is widely portrayed as both a real and a symbolic achievement of the civil rights movement (e.g., Tate 1994).

Both Goldberg and Lewis share long and well-established track records of public service as both activists and as elected officials. But Lewis's achievements, both inside and outside office, are ascribed to

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an outcome of the civil rights movement, while Goldberg's efforts in office are portrayed as distinct from the movements in which she developed her political commitments and expertise. Indeed, even in her own report on her efforts to ensure a good spot for the protesters, published as an op-ed in the Los Angeles Times, Goldberg made no mention of her movement background (Goldberg 2000). "Our democracy functions best with a multiplicity of voices and when all have the opportunity to be heard. We, as elected officials, have a responsibility to protect their rights to do so, even as we ensure the safety of the City."

I would suggest that this contrast is one that is emblematic of a larger pattern in American politics. Regardless of their political commitments and loyalties, both Goldberg and Lewis are experienced and savvy politicians, emphasizing the personal attributes and backgrounds that are most likely to help them in their current efforts. Goldberg does not constantly promote the New Left in her background because, mostly, it is not now helpful. The free speech movement, forgotten in most popular discourse, is seen as the cause of some unpleasant outcomes: the sexual revolution, national narcissism, and moral decay. These arguments are made only polemically by some people on the right (e.g., Collier and Horowitz 1989), but politically refuted visibly by no one. Goldberg knew that she was safer linking her claims about the protesters in Los Angeles to the Founders than to her own political background. That background, in contemporary politics, is mostly unwanted baggage.

In contrast, in emphasizing the longer term effects of the civil rights movement, Lewis is in synch with the larger cultural view of that movement, which sees it as a successful and heroic struggle for equality for African-Americans, in consonance with values expressed by the Declaration of Independence. The establishment of a national day commemorating Martin Luther King, Jr., during the Republican dominated politics of the 1980s, marks the consolidation of a narrative of efficacy for this movement. Of course, this is not all. Virtually all of the Southern states in the United States now organize and promote "civil rights tourism," as does the National Park Service.<sup>(3)</sup> The struggles of the 1950s and 1960s have become every bit as accepted a part of the heroic American story as the American revolution, even accepted and prompted and distorted by those who opposed the movement during its hey-day. Lewis believes his current political concerns benefit from the connotations of the civil rights movement.

This paper is about the politics of claiming credit. Effectively taking the credit for some desirable outcome is an essential element of politics. In tightly controlled, closed, polities, both mythic and real, leaders control the mass media in order to present a coherent, consistent, self-serving and state-serving narrative that ascribes responsibility and blame. In democratic polities, like the United States, the process is somewhat more complicated, for all versions of causality and responsibility can be contested. We see particularly visible examples in the current presidential campaign, where Vice President Al Gore's claim to have "created the internet" quickly became a national joke. Similarly, President George Bush's claim of credit for ending the cold war was contested by both allies and opponents, as is President Clinton's claim of responsibility for substantial reductions in national unemployment and in the elimination of the national deficit. At the same time, mayors across the United States claim credit for reductions in the rate of violent crime, even as they employ a wide range of crime control strategies, often conflicting. Similarly, George Bush's allies recently cited a Rand Report which, they said, ranked public education in Texas first in the nation, even though a cursory reading of that report undermines that claim.<sup>(4)</sup> The pattern is that political leaders try to take credit for whatever they can get away with, knowing that their own opponents and critics in the mass media might take them to task for incredible claims. The stakes are high, however, and the relative openness of debate within political and cultural arenas generally encourages and rewards the bold.

The stakes for successfully claiming credit are similarly high for social protest movements, and the outcomes uncertain and variable. If the civil rights movement represents one extreme point on the continuum of success in claiming credit, it is not hard to find many other movements at the opposite pole. Curiously, it is often the people who lead and animate the social movements of our time who are most willing to ignore their generally partial victories. Christian Smith, in his fine treatment of the movement against United States intervention in Central America, interviewed key activists and asked them to assess their effectiveness. For the most part, they were mercilessly self-critical (Smith 1996: 366-67), quick to acknowledge not only falling short of their goals, but also to blame themselves, the media, and

conservative political culture and/or political apathy. We can see in such a case the sharp distinction that can be drawn between influence and success.

Of course, the consequences of who succeeds in claiming success are of tremendous significance. Regardless of whatever the relative weights of influence dispassionate and well-informed scholars assign to various factors in promoting social change, the popular story and the scholarly consensus often do not line up. Although on occasion one may influence the other over time. Importantly, it is the popular story that is far more likely to affect what happens next; the stories people hear about the past influence how they view the possibilities for the future, and most significantly, their possible role in making it. A dominant story about the influence of a citizens' movement on politics and policy legitimizes extra-institutional mobilization on particular issues, and is a resource for mobilization in the future. As Kim Voss (1998) notes, a story that tells of a movement's failure to get what it wants, but offers an explanation of why and strategies for improvement can also be a resource for subsequent mobilization. In contrast, however, a dominant story that emphasizes the power of institutional actors to do what they want, regardless of whether for good or evil, robs incipient movements of a residuum of efficacy in the citizenry that can produce substantial extra-institutional politics.

In this paper, I will explore the disparities in success at claiming credit, with the intent of explaining why some challengers end up deriving credit both in the short and long term for their efforts, while others do not. I begin by looking at the question of the outcomes of social movements, briefly reviewing the relevant literature, which focuses predominantly on public policy. I then move to the literature on public policy, examining the difficulties in assessing success or failure of policies. Using Deborah Stone's (1997) insights on causal narratives, I focus on the construction of dominant stories, suggesting why certain kinds of movements may be better positioned than others to win support for their version of the story. I then identify a number of variables, including goals, political positioning, coalition politics, and constituencies, that explain why some movements have a harder time claiming credit than others. I conclude by suggesting that the positioning of institutional actors, and the degree of their identification with a social movement, is critical to the movement's capacity to claim success.

### **Social Movement Outcomes: You Can't Ever Get All You Want**

In explaining the differential attributions of success to social movement, we must, at once, confront the most obvious answer to the question of why some movements are better at claiming credit for their achievements than others. Simply, some movements win more extensive responses than others. Although this is surely a relevant factor, it is clearly only part of the story. Without doubt, the civil rights movement changed the face of America, and the nature of racial politics to this date. At the same time, widely articulated goals of equality and opportunity are belied by ongoing inequalities in the employment market, and even much more basically, infant mortality. Whatever the achievements of the civil rights movement, there is much it did not win. It is significant that opponents, bystanders, and participants all choose to recognize some accomplishments, even if viewing the work to be done very differently.

On the other hand, there are real victories, albeit mostly unclaimed, available to the veterans of the Central America Solidarity movement. Although the Sandinista government fell in Nicaragua, it did so from an election, not a foreign military invasion-an alternative that seemed very possible in the early 1980s. Indeed, Smith (1996) makes a compelling case that the multinational peace politics, particularly efforts by the United States government, were substantially influenced by the citizen movements of the 1980s. Although the outcomes in terms of Central American politics and United States foreign policy were substantially different from the expressed goals of the movement, they were certainly not insulated from them. The absence of a movement narrative for what happened in Central America left the Reagan administration to take credit for ousting the Sandinistas-over the difficulties of the misguided diffuse left in the United States. In the first case, incremental achievements are seen as the foundation of subsequent efforts; in the second case, in contrast, such incremental achievements appear at best as pale consolation. It is critical to recognize that the relationship between actual achievements and claimed achievements is

not automatic, and that accepted narratives of influence are socially constructed in a contest of meaning and narrative between challengers and opponents.

The consequences of who succeeds in claiming credit are of huge significance. The old axiom that history belongs to the winners might properly be rephrased: those who win in the writing of history shape the future. That the civil rights movement is accepted as a cause for significant improvements in the treatment of African Americans, both by the state and by individuals, has been a source of inspiration for other social movements-on the right as well as the left-providing a sense that the proactive efforts of individuals in the service of a moral cause against great odds was worthwhile. It has also spurred imitators in terms of both tactics and language. That demonstrations, marches, and civil disobedience were part of a repertoire of contention that worked effectively vindicates non-conventional politics-at least sometimes. In contrast, the fact that the Sanctuary and non-intervention movements are viewed by those who initiated them as costly and ultimately futile efforts has obvious bearing on the prospects for launching subsequent challenges on matters of foreign policy.<sup>(5)</sup>

Scholars studying the impact of movements need to draw fine distinctions between the causes of movements and their effects, in order to make credible claims about the influence of particular campaigns. At the same time, the scholarly evaluation may be quite different from the popular one-and it is the latter that will be more important in future politics. Movements that affect large changes may not be around to claim the credit for their achievements, and other social movements may do a better job at claiming credit for achievements than actually affecting change. Regardless of the actual impact of a challenging movement, there is a process of social construction in assessing influence (beyond the scope of most studies of impact). In this paper I mean to explore that process, and to suggest why some movements are going to be better at claiming credit than others. The argument that I will make is that movements that see their influence at least partly as positioning persons within mainstream political and social institutions, are going to be more effective and more invested in their claims of influence. In contrast, groups that represent an identity based on belief rather than being, offering an identity that successful individuals can slip or have stolen from them, have a harder time making claims about the effectiveness of the past.

The nature of influence and the outcomes of social movements are difficult to access in any kind of reliable way. As students of social movements have noted (see, e.g., Giguni et al. 1999; Amenta, Dunleavy and Bernstein 1994), the factors that give rise to social movements are often also those that give rise to policy change. In assessing the impact of movements, we can not easily separate their effects from their causes. What is more, social movements always struggle in circumstances of adversity, more or less (cf. Burstein 1999). They represent minority constituencies or points of view, or majorities who are structurally disadvantaged in conventional politics. (If a viewpoint for a particular kind of social change were embraced by those well-positioned to implement policy, there would be no need for movements.) This is the case for all sorts of movements, and the critical questions are where to set the bar for success, and how to determine who was influential in achieving what.

Scholars have generally set the bar for success rather low and have been, if anything, overly generous to challengers in imputing influence. The scholarly evaluation of the impact of social movements has derived generally from William Gamson's landmark study of challenging groups in the United States prior to World War II. Gamson assessed outcomes only in regard to the state in two distinct and sometimes overlapping ways: a group can gain recognition as an actor; and/or a group can get some of its policy demands met. Gamson also employed an extremely generous definition of success and an extraordinarily inclusive approach to influence. If the aims of the challenging group had been achieved to any degree, they were counted as successful, even if they were not the only actor pressing for this particular reform. Additionally, the time horizon for success ranged up to 70 years, even if the challenging group had long since disappeared.<sup>(6)</sup> Activists, who necessarily live in the politics of the moment are unlikely to set the bar so low, or to be around 70 years later to make their case. One mobilizes by systematically inflating goals, urgency, and the possibilities for success in the shorter term (see Gamson and Meyer 1996).

Subsequent attempts to assess the impact of social movements on public policy have offered a less comprehensive approach to challengers and outcomes than Gamson, but have provided more detail on particular policy issues. For example, Piven and Cloward (1971; 1977) focused on the impact of poor people's movements; Amenta (1998) addressed the New Deal era old age pension and social welfare expenditures; Small (1988) examined the impact of the protests against the war in Vietnam. In each of these cases, and in many others, the analysts employed a number of methods, including interviews, process tracing, multivariate analysis, and paired comparisons, to discern the connections between protests and policy outputs.

Even the enactment of a policy can hardly qualify as an unambiguous success for a social movement. Students of public policy are quick to argue about how to evaluate the success of a policy in achieving its articulated goals. As Ingram and Mann (1980: 12) caution, "Success and failure are slippery concepts, often highly subjective and reflective of an individual's goals, perception of need, and perhaps even psychological disposition toward life." The nature of the legislative process in the United States essentially mandates both polemics outside government and compromise within institutions, such that most people involved are getting somewhat less than what they would want. What is more, as Ingram and Mann (1980) note, the growth of single issue groups means that policymakers are constantly responding to people who are searching for something on which trade-offs and logrolling are unacceptable. At the same time, the pressures of single issue groups and social movements, in conjunction with the institutional inertia of American politics, lead political leaders to oversell any of the programs they propose and any bits of legislation they had a hand in achieving (see Edelman 1988).

Rhetoric about "ending welfare as we know it," fighting a "war" against drugs after losing one against poverty, or adopting "zero tolerance" for crime or environmental pollution predominates. There is a mismatch of a political discourse that emphasizes absolutes with a political process that prizes compromise and incrementalism. Thus, the dynamics of contemporary American politics virtually mandate that most people are going to be disappointed most of the time, and ambitious reformers are going to be quicker to see defeats than victories. The growth of government activity since the 1960s, legitimating and encouraging more single issue groups and social movements, exacerbates this dynamic of disappointment (Godwin and Ingram 1980).

But direct influence in the policy process is not the only way in which social movements can demonstrate effects. Indeed, social movements can, and do, do much more than engage in the policy process. Meyer and Whittier (1994) contend that we need a multi-level framework for evaluating the outcomes of social movements, separating out the impact of social movements on: policy, organizations, and individuals. Simply, social movements can affect the substance and/or process of policy, can affect the organizational structure, practice, and culture of groups that lodge challenges (e.g., Moore 1996), and can influence the individuals who participate in them (e.g., McAdam 1988), all in ways that alter the nature of subsequent social movements. Yet activists rarely mobilize with the express intent of only creating organizations or changing individual lives.

Extending the idea of a broader field of influence for movements, Rochon (1998) contends that the arena in which movements have the greatest effect is cultural, not political, although there are obvious connections between value change and policy change. He claims that contemporary movements generally affect more influence in culture than in policy. Yet they direct their efforts to the arenas in which they are less likely to be directly successful, and are correspondingly less likely to see the impact of their efforts. In addressing the issue of cultural change, Rochon confronts the difficulties of discerning paths of influence, explaining the twin errors of assigning responsibility of cultural change to the broad environment or to specific actors. He contends that cultural change is not an automatic response to changes in the environment, and that theories that treat it as such obscure both human agency and complicated political processes. Because cultural change appears to happen suddenly, simultaneously sweeping diverse and decentralized settings, often through relatively invisible actions, it is easy for the influence of social movements to be obscured, and credit to be widely dispersed. Rochon contends that by studying the movement of ideas we can begin to see what processes are actually at work.

For Rochon (1998: 22), broad cultural change begins with the creation and development of new ideas within "critical communities," generally relatively small, but not typically discrete or insulated from the larger society.<sup>(7)</sup> They develop around problem identification, analysis and prescription, developing their own channels of communication, and finding ways to manage their own internal differences. The role of "experts" recognized by mainstream politics and culture is absolutely critical in defining the boundaries of legitimate discourse on particular issues. A critical community that lacks such experts is doomed to marginalization and insulation from mainstream politics and influence.

Social protest movements bring the ideas of these critical communities to a broader audience (Rochon 1998: 30). As movements make claims on matters of policy, it is not necessarily the achievement of desired changes in policy that determines the influence of a movement; there are also, often unclaimed, "spillover effects" (see Meyer and Whittier 1994). The failure of the Equal Rights Amendment, which consumed a great deal of feminist effort during the 1970s, is a useful case in point. Although the Constitutional amendment was ultimately not ratified, the amendment campaign gave a clear focus to the much broader cultural claims of the feminist movement. Despite the policy defeat, widespread cultural values and attitudes about women in politics and in the workforce changed dramatically.<sup>(8)</sup>

When, however, a social movement succeeds in expanding its understanding of an issue to a broader audience, a movement's influence, and particularly its capacity to claim influence, falters. Rochon (1998: 195-196) notes the irony, explaining, "...it is at precisely this point that the influence of the critical community in shaping understanding so the issue begins to wane. As the culture takes hold of a new idea, adaptation occurs to make the concept fit with existing cultural beliefs...as the wider culture takes possession of the concept there will develop an even wider spread of opinion. In effect, the critical community loses exclusive ownership of the issue—precisely because the new concepts are now part of the wider culture. As a consequence of this expanding interest, people outside of the critical community begin to portray themselves (and be accepted by the media) as 'experts' on the issue."

At such a time, movement activists are able to slip out of, or into, identification with a particular movement. Thus, someone who had no previous connection with say, the women's movement, can claim to be a feminist-or environmentalist or animal rights supporter or peace activist, and so on. In doing so, not only do they make explicit claims about their own identity, but also about the politics and identity of the larger movements. As any movement is the product of a range of groups that cooperate to varying degrees for political gains, yet still differ among themselves (Meyer and Rochon 1997), this problem of identity and politics is particularly acute. In a relatively open polity, such as the United States, the lines separating activists within a movement from others sympathetic (or not) in various degrees are extremely difficult to draw, and movements are particularly weak in policing their own boundaries.

The issue of the insularity of a social movement from mainstream society and culture is a critical one, both for the success of a movement and for its capacity to claim credit. A movement whose boundaries with mainstream politics and culture are very porous is better positioned to affect real changes, not only in policy but also in politics and culture. At the same time, such a movement can easily lose control of its message, and correspondingly of the capacity to claim credit. One whose boundaries are less permeable to mainstream politics and culture is in a better position to define its message and control its adherents, but far less likely to affect change in the broader society.

### **Constructing Causality**

In very different ways than those social scientists use in seeking the relative influence of various factors on some kind of outcome, political figures of all sorts also seek to construct causality. At once, it is critical to recognize explicitly that the actual influence a dispassionate observer's evaluation of the influence of a movement may be only tangentially related to the public collective evaluation. We have elements of a story available for construction through public events: the efforts of a group of activists, the changes in a policy, the changes in political conditions. The story that is actually accepted is one that combines an edited version of the available elements, perhaps supplemented with fictions that resonate

with longstanding national myths or widespread cultural beliefs. The relative amount of credit given to various elements in producing policy changes plays a tremendous role in what happens next.

As for the ambitious politician, the process of claiming success for a social movement is quite different from the one of achieving influence, although the success in crafting and then promoting an explanation of what happened in the past may have a large influence on the future. The dominant narrative about the trajectory of a movement or of the origins of a policy becomes part of the culture in which movements arise-or not, legitimating certain kinds of claims, actors, and tactics, while simultaneously undermining others. To date, however, students of social protest have devoted far more effort to understanding the dynamics of social protest than to making sense of the dynamics of subsequent interpretations.

Deborah Stone's (1997) work on public policy is helpful in understanding the construction of causality and the process of credit claiming. Although Stone's expressed concern is not the politics of social protest, but that of policy formation, the concepts she develops are of particular relevance to making sense of the understanding of past political struggles. According to Stone (1997: 189), causality is asserted through "strategically crafted" stories, adorned with symbols and numbers, and pressed by "political actors who try to make their versions the basis of policy choices. Causal stories are essential political instruments for shaping alliances and for settling the distributions of benefits and costs." A story identifies what factors are relevant to a particular issue, which policy areas are amenable to human intervention, and which actors are politically significant. A story that emphasizes effective and purposive efforts by citizens legitimizes the process of social protest and simultaneously reinforces the political importance of particular parties outside of government. In contrast, a story that emphasizes broad historical forces or the efforts only of committed individuals within government, works to delegitimize and demobilize possible citizen movements.

Of course, in the real world, causes are always complex, with numerous variables interacting to promote particular outcomes. Social scientists recognize this and write accordingly. As Stone notes, however, such complexity does not play effectively in the political arena. Indeed, she claims (Stone 1997: 196), "In politics, ironically, models of complex causes often function like accidental or natural cause. They postulate a kind of innocence because no identifiable actor can exert control over the whole system or web of interactions. Without overarching control, there can be no purpose-and no responsibility."

Political actors, and aspiring political actors, are wise to recognize the necessity of offering a simple cause, one that clearly and unambiguously identifies problems, offers solutions, and claims unambiguous lines of agency. At any given time, numerous causal stories compete for primacy. Stone (1997:197) cautions that "[t]he different sides in an issue act as if they are trying to find the 'true' cause, but they are always struggling to influence which idea is selected to guide policy. Political conflicts over causal stories are therefore more than empirical claims about sequences of events. They are fights about the possibility of control and the assignment of responsibility."

If political actors compete to win adherents for their preferred story of influence, the factors that make one or another story predominate in politics, although influenced by credibility, are not limited by it. The vigor and skill of advocates of a particular narrative is critical to its acceptance, for as Stone (1997: 202) notes, "...causal stories need to be fought for, defended, and sustained. There is always someone to tell a competing narrative, and getting others to believe one version of events rather than another is hardly automatic. Research on public opinion suggests that to some extent people have stable, overall outlooks on responsibility for social problems....But public acceptance of causal stories is also strongly influenced by the way television news frames stories....A causal story is more likely to be successful if its proponents have visibility, access to media, and prominent positions; if it accords with widespread and deeply held cultural values; if it somehow captures and responds to a natural mood; and if its implicit prescription entails no radical redistribution of power or wealth."

Causal stories can uphold the existing order and well-entrenched public actors, or they can undermine that order and give support to insurgent efforts for meaningful political change. Causal stories create and shift political alliances, making certain claims appear viable and certain coalitions seem possible, while simultaneously foreclosing other claims and coalitions. It is critical to recognize that the



resonance of a story with conventional political and moral values heightens its chances of being accepted. At the same time, such resonance comes at a price of limiting the sorts of claims made, the kinds of tactics employed, and the extent of changes sought. Activists always face a difficult balancing act in trying to stretch, but not transgress, the boundaries of legitimacy.

In looking at the stories of influence told by social movement activists and their competitors in the public arena, building on Stone, we can identify the implicit negotiations in constructing accepted narratives of influence. Perhaps the most successful case, that of the civil rights movement for African-Americans, demonstrates both the extent and limits of success claimed. Although the movement is widely given credit for winning basic civil rights, most visibly voting, the definition of that movement emphasizes charismatic leadership rather than political organizing, most notably in the eventual inclusion of Martin Luther King, Jr., in the pantheon of national heroes. Indeed, King is one of the few honored by a national holiday. The frequently told story of Rosa Parks's civil disobedience on a bus in Montgomery in December 1955 is decontextualized and depoliticized. Parks is remembered as a tired old lady, with rarely a mention of her connections to long-standing organizations like the NAACP and the Highlander Folk School's leadership programs. In short, although the movement's influence on politics and life in the United States is acknowledged, the movement is essentially defined as something inevitable or mystical, quite apart from the processes of contemporary politics, and surely beyond the aspirations of the citizens of today.

### **Why Some Movement Stories Stick**

In thinking about the relative success of the civil rights movement in claiming credit, albeit granting the limitations outlined above, we can identify certain variables that make it more or less likely for a movement to succeed in claiming credit. These include the goals of a movement, the survival of at least some of its component organizations, the institutional positioning of allies or participants sympathetic to its influence, the relative costs and risks of claiming victory, and the nature of the constituency the movement represents.

#### **Goals**

Movements always target for more than they ultimately get—unless they succeed in taking state power, in which case they are generally unable to deliver the specific promises they made anyway. If this is the case, it is important to figure out why some claimants do better at taking credit for partial victories. The nature of expressed goals is critical here. Goals that are too marginal, or alternatively too broad, are difficult to claim for very long. Goals that if achieved would affect benefits for the entirety of the human population, or even the populace of a nation, even if acknowledged are hard for outsiders to get credit for.

At once, goals that do not affect some substantial portion of the body politic, even if claimed, are unlikely to resonate with a larger population. Activists frustrated by lack of influence on policy have in recent years devoted a greater share of their efforts simply toward winning the rights to protest at specific places and in particular ways (della Porta 1999). The debate about the location of a protest zone for the Democratic National Convention is a relevant case in point. That demonstrators may succeed in winning their desired space, or might successfully carry off the protest events they plan dramatically and with large numbers, can only be seen as a victory for a short time. Such achievements disappear unless there is an instrumental utility to them. In other words, while some activists may get tremendous satisfaction in, say, staging a large demonstration and hearing good speakers and music, such satisfaction is not likely to spread beyond the faithful, nor is it likely to be very long-lived. For both the larger public and for a good many of the participants, the successful demonstration or protest event, whatever else it is, is also a means to some other end. Claims of credit for succeeding in staging the event, if no larger outcome can be claimed, will evaporate quickly.

Groups seeking broader collective goods (Amenta and Young 1999; Cooper 1996) face stronger competitors in claiming credit. Although a movement may seek collective goods from the margins, as it

approaches some kind of policy impact its claims will be taken up albeit in some kind of dilute fashion, by more mainstream political actors (Rochon 1998). The general benefits of such policy reforms, be it cleaner air or more thoroughly labeled food packaging, will be claimed not only by the movement, but by mainstream political actors. Because the benefit is diffuse, it is not only harder for a social movement to claim credit, but also less likely that some distinct constituency will feel the same stake in the goal achievement.

For movements that achieve some degree of success, there is also the problem of what might be called a moving finish line. When the modern environmental movement emerged in the 1960s, its initial focus on pesticides quickly generated real victories. Of course, environmentalists tried and continue to try to build upon such policy achievements and press new policy frontiers (Gornick and Meyer 1998). In his comparative analysis of the environmental movement, Rucht (1999) notes how the movement pressed new instrumental policy goals in the service of the larger goal of a clean environment. As the movement succeeded in gaining some recognition and influence, component organizations constantly sought new related issues on which to make claims. The work never done, movement leaders, for reasons that will be discussed below, generally focus on the greatest threat or the most salient current opportunity, leaving whatever victories of the past for others to claim credit for.

### **Organizational Survival and the Politics of Coalitions**

Like Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner" or Melville's Ishmael, someone must be around to tell the story. Although organizations that do not focus on sustaining themselves may, as Piven and Cloward (1977) argue, have more impact over the short term, they are exceptionally poorly positioned to take credit for whatever influence they do effect. Activists and professional organizers move on to other issues and other organizations, often shifting the emphasis of their political concerns. Instrumentally, there is no office to issue press releases, to return phone calls from reporters, to organize subsequent demonstrations, and to issue continual correctives to competitors' reports of influence.

In the United States, contemporary social movement politics are coalition politics (Meyer and Rochon 1997). Social movements are the product of organizations and individuals who affiliate in the service of particular campaigns and causes, but who maintain their own visions of justice, their own arsenal of tactics, their distinct organizational needs, and their distinct, yet often overlapping, constituencies. When a social movement succeeds, it is because the efforts of distinct organizations have a synergistic effect. Yet, some organizations, however effective they may be, are short-lived. Their version of events, their claims to effectiveness, their vision of what is to be done—in short, their story—disappears, particularly when other organizations survive. Thus, in contemporary politics the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), and to a lesser extent the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Council), are far better positioned to explain the influence of the civil rights movement than is SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee), which imploded more than thirty years ago. While SNCC's direct action campaigns may have been critical to the political impact of the civil rights movement, narratives about more reformist politics predominate. Similarly, the radical edge of the labor movement has its story told by academics far more than by organizers, and to much smaller audiences than its more mainstream allies. Because the more moderate organizations are those most likely to survive (Wilson 1995), the stories about social movement influence tend to emphasize more institutional routes to effectiveness, downplaying the grassroots activity and mass mobilizations that animated the movements.

### **The Risks of Victories**

Claiming credit entails risks for social movements. Movements that are successful generally stimulate their opponents (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996), while simultaneously risking complacency among their adherents. For many constituencies it is risk and threat rather than support from government that generates mobilization, through both activism and financial contributions. In the case of abortion politics,

for example, Supreme Court decisions are almost invariably followed by press conferences by groups on both sides of the issue immediately claiming defeat; their intent is to keep the faithful engaged. The abortion issue also illustrates the politics of compromise and partial policy resolutions. Although the legal right of abortion has remained in the United States since 1973, movement organizations continually battle on a broad range of issues ranging from explicit discussion of abortion to regulation of particular procedures to parental or spousal notification to the size of a buffer zone separating anti-abortion protesters from clinics. In short, there are always ample threats and potential defeats to find.

In the case of the civil rights movement, even as the policy victories and social changes activists sought were far less than the goals they articulated, activists did succeed in making it politically costly to attack the goals of inclusion. In polite society and in the political mainstream, we no longer see opposition to the rights of African-Americans articulated as a social good. Such talk, if not beliefs, has been banished to the marginalized political netherworld of isolationist politics. Articulating support for, even if redefining at the same time, the goals of racial integration and equality is low or no risk politics. This was not always the case for advocates of civil rights for ethnic minorities, nor is it for those who express sympathy with gay and lesbian rights. Vanquishing the explicit opposition makes it much easier to claim credit.

Given the nature of social movement politics there are additional dangers to constructing stories of optimism or achievement. Journalist Gregg Easterbrook, an avowed liberal seeking to vindicate government action, published a massive book in 1995 which argued, in more than 700 pages of copious details that the federal government action, prompted by environmentalism and the environmental movement, had made huge progress in improving the environment. He is far from kind, however, to the environmentalists. In his story the environmentalists, against better-funded and better organized opposition, fought successfully to put ecological concerns on the government agenda. "Through the early 1980s," he writes (Easterbrook 1995: 370), "though outgunned in legal talent, lobbying access, and the funds necessary to make political donations, they won victory after victory." Their failure to claim victory, however, he contends, is the result of their cooptation by mainstream politics.

"Enviros won the last 20 years of political battles by a wide margin," Easterbrook (1995: 381) claims, but you would never know it from their public statements...As environmentalists have become effective lobbyists they have learned the negative tools of the trade: bluster, veiled threats, misrepresentation (383)." The pressures of direct mail fundraising, he argues, lead environmentalists to employ hyperbole and distortion in order to continue to raise money. To generalize, a group that claims success risks forfeiting its capacity to mobilize, either to sustain networks and organizations and employment that it has developed, and also in terms of lodging subsequent claims.

Unsurprisingly, a result of both politics and the moving finish line, Easterbrook's book encountered mixed and negative reviews from environmentalists. As example, one review in Environmental Science and Technology (Reilly, Shabecoff, and Davis 1995) took Easterbrook to task for "tak[ing] the remaining environmental problems too lightly. The global environment may have improved but the fact remains that these problems are very serious and that there should be no letup in efforts to address them."

### **Marching into and Through Institutions: Constituencies and Claimants**

As Stone (1997) notes, the relative positioning of claimants has a great deal to do with what stories get out and how well they are received. Movements that make inroads into established institutions, particularly elected positions in government, generate individuals with both stake and status for making claims about social movement influence. To the extent that someone representing a social movement stands next to candidates for office, makes speeches from the well of the House of Representatives, and represents movement positions in policy debates, that spokesperson is showing one aspect of movement influence.

The non-debate about the end of the cold war demonstrates this point clearly. Whereas most peace movement organizations had begun to fade in the early 1980s, and deployment of the particular

new missiles they opposed most strenuously commenced, their opponents were far better positioned to make sense of the restoration of arms control in the later 1980s and the fall of Communism in 1989. Pundits, politicians, and well-supported academics supporting the administration of Ronald Reagan claimed that the threat of an eventual ballistic missile defense system, popularly known as Star Wars, or just generally toughness and spending during the 1980s wore the Soviet Union down. Democratic allies of the peace movement in Congress claimed, instead, that it was 40 years of bipartisan containment policy which achieved these objectives. In short, mainstream politicians of both major political parties used the incredible events of 1989 as grist for retelling old stories supporting their preferred policies.<sup>(9)</sup>

The empirical evidence supporting these positions is extraordinarily weak. Risse-Kappen (1994), tracing the transnational movement of ideas, and Knopf (1998), assessing the impact of the American peace movement on national security policy, demonstrate fairly convincingly the impact of the peace movement on the end of the cold war. Newly opened archives in the former Soviet Union provide additional evidence to counter the dominant narratives. Evangelista (1999), after examining the newly available Soviet documents on national security and arms control, makes a compelling argument that moderation from the West, particularly the United States, rather than hard line policies, produced and accelerated reform. Activists who made these arguments earlier, however (see, e.g., Meyer 1990-91; Cortright 1993), were generally ignored. More pointedly, most activists themselves were willing to accept some version of the dominant narratives.<sup>(10)</sup>

In this case, activists whose organizations had been crippled years before were poorly positioned to make claims of influence and credit, so much so that they were willing to accept stories from those they believe had defeated them. At the same time, one-time allies of the movement eagerly and effectively ditched that identification to seize another they believed more promising. Thus, members of Congress who had eagerly sought to portray themselves as peace activists in the early 1980s now embraced the mantle of containment instead.

Persons, rather than policies, are better positioned to make claims for particular movements. When a movement is about the treatment of groups of individuals, e.g., African-Americans, women, gays and lesbians, the development of individual careers is readily seen as a product of the relevant social movement. The appointment of such persons to positions in government, or anointment by the mass media, enables them to claim credit for partial victories, even if those so advantaged are not hardcore movement activists or represent a more moderate wing of movement. In contrast, the same people winning access for policy-focused movements can not claim those partials; indeed, exercising influence within policymaking circles frequently entails disavowing movement connections. The peace activist who takes a government appointment to the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, or the environmentalist who works for the Environmental Protection Agency, for example, disavows identification as an activist as part of the bargain. Even if he did not have to do so, activists in the street would quickly disavow him for excessive moderation. Thus, for some kinds of movements winning access to political institutions essentially means slipping an identity.

Middle-class movements (see Kann 1986, Parkin 1968), which mobilize on the basis of an issue, distinguish their participants from the society they challenge not only by belief, but by norms of presentation, styles, conversation, and so forth. When their ideas are accommodated, however, at most some portion of style or of belief is incorporated into governance, generally carried by an elected official or appointee. The connections between governmental employees, seeking credibility, and the movements that supported them, seeking viability, operate in such a fashion that there is no ready identification between the margins and the mainstream. The elected official presents ideas as her own even if claiming identification with the movement.

Movements that are based on providing coherent benefits to a distinct constituency are thus better positioned to claim credit than those that build support on the basis of belief. Whereas skin color, gender, ethnicity, or even sexual orientation, are relatively "sticky" identities in contemporary America, movements based on belief are far more "slippery." We see that how slippery an identity is changes over time. Although women in mainstream politics can now sometimes disavow the impact of the feminist movement (see Sawyers and Meyer 1999), African-Americans who try to shed this identity have it thrust

back upon them by mainstream politics. Paradoxically, in effect the ongoing work needed for this kind of movement ensures its stake in claiming credit.

In discussing identity, labor in the United States provides a particularly interesting case. Whereas in Western Europe an individual's identification with labor-and indeed, the working class-has historically been a lifelong one. This is not the norm in the United States. As organized labor in America suffered under Taft-Hartley and red-baiting in the post-war period (Goldfield 1987), its members encountered increasing opportunities and incentives for shedding their identification with the larger movement, making individual rather than collective goals the primary focus of even collective efforts. Unlike the African-American who makes individual gains as a result of the civil rights movement, the worker who moves up through the ranks frequently abandons them.

By the end of the 1960s, the New Left would disparage and dismiss all the achievements of the labor movement. As example, in his popular analysis of organized labor first published in the early 1970s, Aronowitz (1974:14) opined that the organized left in Western Europe and the United States had helped "consolidate the power of capital over workers in two ways: it assisted in the organization of unions that have increasingly been instruments for the disciplining and control of workers; and it fought for reforms that strengthened the power of the capitalist state to organize and rationalize the most chaotic features of the socioeconomic system and secure the dependency of larger segments of the underlying population on state welfare measures." With such beliefs widespread, organizing new workers became a struggle up an even steeper hill.

### Conclusions

The academic problem addressed in this paper is understanding why some movements seem to do so much better than others in claiming credit for their victories. In this paper, I have identified a number of factors that make it easier for some movements to claim credit than for others. Particularly, campaigns that seek inclusion of a disadvantaged minority, a concentrated benefit, are better positioned than those that seek collective benefits, and that organizations that survive and flourish are best positioned to get their version of the story out and make it stick. At the same time, groups that must mobilize on the basis of belief encounter serious risks in claiming victories, and may be loathe to do so.

The inherent problem addressed here for activists is the challenge of claiming victories gracefully while continuing to mobilize. I do not provide a clear answer here, and I will continue looking for one. I suspect that Voss's (1998) notion of a "fortifying myth" is particularly important here. While the concept as she initially offers it is a way to cope with defeat, in fact, the construction of a myth explaining the past is important to all sorts of challengers, regardless of their relative success. In the case of the civil rights movement, both activists and mainstream culture have effectively negotiated a myth which ascribes responsibility for large changes in politics and culture to charismatic personalities, particularly Martin Luther King, undertaking extraordinary risks.

In contrast, many other challengers in the United States have been slow to create new myths, effectively creating *de novo* an atmosphere of crisis as a vehicle for mobilization. Such efforts will win sporadic victories, and have their good work claimed by others. Some participants will leave activism, feeling frustrated by the perceived futility of their work, and new organizations will constantly hold the primary responsibility for new mobilizations. By learning how to find and promote narratives of history and policy change that emphasize the purposive efforts of citizens to make the world better, we improve their prospects of doing so in the future.

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2. Jackie Goldberg describes her activist background in an interview with the national security archive ([www.hfni.gsehd.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/interviews/episode-13/goldberg1.html](http://www.hfni.gsehd.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/interviews/episode-13/goldberg1.html)).
3. On civil rights tourism, there are a number of recent sources. A good start is a Debbie Elliot report, "Civil Rights and Tourism," on National Public Radio's All Things Considered, broadcast on July 4, 2000. Elliott reports that while Southern states were for a long time ashamed of their role in the history of civil rights, they have now discovered that it is a good source of tourism and money. Following Alabama, virtually every Southern State now promotes Black Heritage sites. The National Park Service offers an inventory of historic sites, and suggests that one has to consider a longer view of American history, including slavery, to understand the civil rights movement, and to consider the civil rights movement to understand any politics since. E.g., see <http://www.cr.nps.gov/delta/heritage.htm>.
4. Texas was ranked 27<sup>th</sup> (of 44 states) in its performance on a standardized test. It did lead, however, the other states in rate of improvement from 1990-1996. Governor Bush, first elected in 1994, presided over the state for only one year of the testing period. Further, the educational policies the Rand report listed as significant: smaller class size, public pre-kindergarten, and greater spending, were all instituted under Bush's predecessors. See Grismer et al. (2000).
5. It must be noted, as Smith (1996) does, that many of the activists involved in these movements, particularly the efforts to provide Sanctuary to refugees from Central America, viewed their efforts in terms of witnessing their beliefs. Demonstrating efficacy was less important, in this view, than moral and spiritual commitments. At the same time, while some people, often those with strong religious commitments, are willing to take on a sort of martyrdom independent of likely efficacy, this will always be a very small number.
6. To his credit, Gamson (1990) has engaged his critics on these issues, publishing his data-and his critics' in the second edition of his book.
7. Risse-Kappen (1994) makes a similar argument, emphasizing the transnational movement of ideas.
8. It is worthwhile to note that neither changes in policy nor changes in culture are irreversible. In the case of the women's movement, both commentators and scholars since the 1980s have been persuasive in arguing that many hard-won changes in both arenas have eroded (e.g., Faludi 1991). Taylor and Rupp (1993) contend that in response to increased political hostility, the women's movement turned inward.
9. Meyer and Marullo (1992) provide much more detail about the debate immediately following the end of the cold war.
10. Cat Lovers against the Bomb, a Nebraska peace group, for its own fundraising published a calendar each year featuring pictures of cats and significant peace movement events. By the end of the 1980s, they had deleted references to specific movement events from the early 1980s, forgetting, for example, about the historic June 12<sup>th</sup> demonstration in 1982, which assembled one million people in New York City to protest, effectively as it turned out, against the Reagan administration's policies. (I wrote to them in the middle-1980s, asking them to restore this commemoration-successfully.)