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Abstract

Visible injustice and dangerous and provocative policies are sometimes met with large and powerful social movements that sometimes generate favorable policy responses. But, more frequently, recognized dangers or injustices do not generate mass responses. Figuring out how to recognize a meaningful opportunity for mass concern and how to put a consequential movement together have long occupied activist organizers and scholars. Of course, effective organizing entails elements of direct outreach, convincing citizens that something's wrong, that it could be different, and that their efforts might matter. But the effectiveness of the pitch and the appeal of the proposal are mightily affected by the context. Organizing is likely to be more effective when the importance of a problem and authorities' inadequate responses are clear. Recognition of a problem is a start to a much longer and more difficult project of building a social movement.

Keywords

sociology, strategies, nuclear security

Introduction

Visible injustice and dangerous and provocative policies are *sometimes* met with large and powerful social movements that *sometimes* generate favorable policy responses. But, more frequently, recognized dangers or injustices do not generate mass responses. Figuring out how to recognize a meaningful opportunity for mass concern and how to put a consequential movement together have long occupied activist organizers and scholars.

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Of course, effective organizing entails elements of direct outreach, convincing citizens that something's wrong, that it could be different, and that their efforts might matter (Benford, 1993; Gamson, 1992; Snow et al., 1986). But the effectiveness of the pitch and the appeal of the proposal are mightily affected by the context (Gamson & Meyer, 1996; Meyer, 2004). Organizing is likely to be more effective when the importance of a problem and authorities' inadequate responses are clear. Recognition of a problem is a start to a much longer and more difficult project of building a social movement.

The threat and costs of the nuclear arms race are particularly challenging for organizers, a danger broadly recognized since the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but only episodically challenged by popular movements (Wittner, 1995). The costs and conduct of the nuclear arms race are distant for most people, who lack both experience and specialized knowledge. Policy is made by a small and relatively insular collection of authorities, generally distant from democratic influences (Andreasen, 2024; Hennigan & Weinberger, 2024; Meyer, 1995). Alternatives to a poorly understood status quo are hard to generate, and it is at least as difficult to counter the fears—of other nations' nuclear or conventional military aggression—that nuclear weapons are supposed to deter. Nuclear threats are global in nature, and meaningful responses demand some level of international cooperation, extraordinarily difficult for citizen activists to negotiate. And there are always other issues that appear more pressing or promising: climate change, labor rights, healthcare, and so on. Even so, some stalwarts have consistently protested for peace and the end of the nuclear arms race, and on occasion been joined by mass publics in their efforts (Nepstad, 2008). The history of the nuclear age is punctuated by large and sometimes effective peace movements that have moderated policies and promoted arms control initiatives (Cortright, 1993; Meyer, 1993).

Nuclear weapons have mostly been on the back-burner of citizen politics since the end of the Cold War, but the current moment seems particularly provocative. Costly and destructive wars in Ukraine and the Middle East constantly threaten to spread and escalate, and at least one belligerent in each war is a nuclear power. Nuclear proliferation remains a threat, particularly as newer nuclear powers, like North Korea or (potentially) Iran seem especially unpredictable. The costs and dangers of technological modernization, including replacing the U.S. nuclear arsenal and stationing new weapons in space demand a response (Hennigan, 2024; Mian et al., 2021).

What is to be Done?

The articles in this special issue mine the history of peace and antinuclear weapons activism to identify strategies for effective responses from citizens. Each piece addresses a particular element of the activist race against the arms race.

David S. Meyer's chapter offers an overview of cycles of protest against nuclear weaponry, paying particular attention to the circumstances under which successful movements emerge. He emphasizes the broad coalitions that have characterized the effective moments of previous movements, identified by both engagement with

mainstream politics and an extremely broad diversity of analyses, remedies, and advocacy tactics.

Although the nature of the nuclear threat matters, effective organizing depends upon recognizing and channeling emotional appeals at the grassroots level. Lisa Leitz, an antiwar activist and scholar, details her experiences in recruiting people to the movement. Effective organizing, she shows, depends upon forging a connection with people, emphasizing their connection to the issue at hand, and taking advantage of the stake that individuals actually have in redressing wrongs. In essence, organizers need to engage distinct kinds of expertise and experience, and then project those claims to standing to a broader audience (Bourdon, 2024).

Kelsy Kretschmer shows that campaigns against nuclear weapons, like those of other social movements, are animated by broad coalitions of groups with different goals, constituencies, and approaches to activism. Social movements are not monolithic, and as a movement grows, new groups bringing new constituencies and approaches proliferate. Debates within a movement coalition are often more frequent and more heated than between movements and the authorities they challenge. Kretschmer reviews strategies for recognizing and managing conflict by sharing resources and attention and by dividing labor among different groups.

Effective social movements must engage mainstream politics; in the United States, this means addressing partisan politics. Michael Heaney provides a broad overview of Republican and Democratic Party responses to activists for nuclear arms control. The primary selection process, leading up to general elections, is a particularly important time for activists, when competitors within a party are likely to be most responsive to their concerns. Heaney shows the nature of those responses and the historical differences between the two major parties in incorporating activists who launch challenges.

Alex Maresca examined resources mobilized for campaigns for nuclear disarmament by focusing on funding for various episodes of the movement. She notes that foundation funding has been erratic, generally following rather than leading waves of activism. As a result, first movers have often been people with slack resources that they could commit to activism, including clergy, academics—including scientists, and middle-class and affluent spouses who did not need to work to support their families. As a result, the movements have been less diverse and less stable than ideal. She argues that effective investment in a movement demands a long-term commitment to build and maintain an activist infrastructure which can respond to opportune moments for public attention (Staggenborg, 1988).

Sharon Erikson Nepstad considers the ongoing debate among activists between institutional and extra-institutional action by offering a deep comparative case study of two historic civil rights activists, Bayard Rustin and Martin Luther King. Although Rustin started his activist career in an absolutist pacifist group, he came to prioritize the maintenance of institutional ties with powerful allies in government, a strategy that King eventually abandoned. Each approach faced distinct obstacles: there is no magic recipe for influence. Nepstad's treatment informs both approaches and their limitations, ultimately arguing for recognizing the necessity of tactical diversity.

David Cortright has been centrally engaged in every large U.S. peace movement campaign in the past 50 years. Drawing from his experience, he focuses on the strategic choices activists make about the claims they make and how they advance them. He is particularly sensitive to the dilemmas inherent in engaging mainstream politics, which invariably entails political compromises some activists find untenable. A key fault line generally emerges within movement coalitions between groups that view institutional politics as critically important and influential and others that see it as a way to squander moments of attention. He argues for a broader tolerance that recognizes the diversity of approaches that emerges within effective social movements.

The articles in this issue provide a critical reflection on the role of strategy in the nuclear disarmament and peace movements throughout history. They detail some of the ups and downs these movements have faced, which are synthesized into useful takeaways for an incipient movement today. No doubt, today's new activists will learn to do better.

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Author Biographies

Kaylin Bourdon is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Carroll College in Helena, MT. Her research interests include the dynamics of standing in political debates, exploring who gets a voice in important public debates and why. Much of her work has focused on the American gun debate, including the ways in which activists construct motherhood as a source of authority and the role of media coverage in shaping how activists are perceived by different audiences. Her dissertation, “Who Speaks for a Movement? The Construction and Reception of Activists’ Claims to Standing,” won the American Sociological Association’s section on Collective Behavior and Social Movements’ Distinguished Contribution to Scholarship Dissertation Award in 2024.

David S. Meyer is Professor of sociology at the University of California, Irvine. He’s the author or editor of 9 books – including his most recent work, *How Social Movements (Sometimes) Matter (Polity)* – and he’s published well over 100 articles, book reviews, and reports that have shaped perspectives on social movements and contentious politics for several decades. In 2017, he received the John D. McCarthy Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Scholarship of Social Movements and Collective Behavior from the Center for the Study of Social Movements at the University of Notre Dame. In 2025, he was named an Andrew Carnegie Fellow.