

Meaning-Making in Social Movements

Introduction for Proposed Special Issue of *Mobilization*

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Over the past century, the field of social movement studies has moved, by fits and starts, toward the recognition and analysis of meaning-making by social movement participants. It may be time, now, to take a final leap in this direction. What would happen if we not only recognize meaning-making as an important facet of social movement mobilizations, but privilege it as the central feature of such phenomena? This special issue of *Mobilization* explores several implications of this leap.

What do we mean by meaning-making? The concept is a broad one that draws on multiple traditions in sociology, anthropology, and other social sciences. At its root is the proposition that humans constantly seek to understand the world around them, and that the search for meaning in the world is both a goal in itself and a spur to action. Meaning includes moral understandings of right and wrong, cognitive understandings of true and false, perceptual understandings of like and unlike, social understandings of identity and difference, aesthetic understandings of attractive and repulsive, and any other understandings that we may choose to identify through our own academic processes of meaning-making.

Social movements may be a particularly conducive site to privilege meaning-making, because their activities foreground resistance to the dominant norms and institutions of society. They raise questions about the possibility of alternative world-views and alternative dispensations, and in so doing they challenge participants and observers to re-think meanings that are too often taken for granted.

Social movement studies has not always stepped up to this challenge. The founding figures, according to the field's various genesis stories, were generally dismissive of their subjects' meaning-making. Karl Marx, for example, treated workers' consciousness as a product of their relation to the means of production; his discussions of ideology and political practice often discussed deviations from what he considered to be a scientific law of societal development, but these deviations did not cause him to incorporate the autonomy of meaning-making into his theoretical system in any extended way. In addition, Marx was actively hostile toward working-class intellectuals who challenged his ideas or position in the Communist movement, and oddly unreflective about his own ability to transcend his class position (Gouldner 1985). Marx's one attempt to survey workers, near the end of his life, included no attitudinal questions (Marx 1880).

The Acrowd psychology¹ of the late 19th century, which is sometimes treated as the direct ancestor of social movement studies, was even more hostile toward its subjects.¹ Scipio Sighele, one of three major figures in this school of thought, based his analysis of Acriminal crowds¹ on the Alaw¹ of hypnotic suggestibility, then extended the metaphor to all assemblies, including elected representatives, whose Aintellectual level..., already quite humble, descends still further as a consequence of the law that we have enunciated¹ (Sighele 1898:211). Gabriel Tarde argued that crowds descend the Aladder of social evolution,¹ defining Acrowds¹ to refer to any organized assembly, including parliaments (Barrows 1981:145). The most famous of all, Gustave Le Bon, plagiarized and popularized the ideas of his predecessors in 1895, including the ladder image, writing that Aby the mere fact that he forms part of an organised crowd, a man descends several rungs on the ladder of civilisation¹ (Le Bon 1995:52).

This derogatory attitude toward social movement participants continued in the 20th century (McPhail 1991:1-60). The most prominent example in North America was Herbert Blumer -- who was in his political opinions very sympathetic to progressive movements, and was said to be the only white

¹The following several paragraphs draw on Kurzman (2004a:129-130).

person Malcolm X ever trusted (Hochschild 1987:ii) -- nonetheless likened crowds to cattle and argued that an individual loses ordinary critical understanding and self-control as he enters into rapport with other crowd members and becomes infused by the collective excitement which dominates them (Blumer 1939:224, 236). In Europe, the leading example was probably Elias Canetti, whose book *Crowds and Power* summoned up images of crowds that spread like fire, like water, like wind -- a series of naturalistic metaphors that sidestepped the issue of meaning-making by reducing participants to inanimate objects (Canetti 1978:75-90).

The field of collective behavior studies that grew out of Blumer's work came to view such dehumanizing treatment of activists as unacceptably reactionary. In 1957, for example, Ralph H. Turner and Lewis M. Killian objected to the notion that collective behavior is inherently irrational and contested the animal-herd analogy (Turner and Killian 1957:16-17, 58). In the second edition of their textbook on the subject, largely rewritten in light of the tumult of the late 1960s, Turner and Killian (1972) go even further, repeatedly rejecting pejorative definitions of collective behavior (see also Couch 1968; McPhail 1991:61-232). In place of these dismissive approaches, the collective behavior school drew on symbolic-interactionism and other social-psychological theories that took meaning-making seriously.

The field of social movement studies, emerging under its own name in the 1970s, moved a step further toward recognizing the importance of meaning-making. Abandoning the social-psychological directions that collective behavior studies was beginning to take, the new field insisted on the rationality of social movement participants. Studies now examined social movements from the perspective of their participants, and sought to establish how these participants viewed their circumstances and goals. This shift was due, in large part, to the subjects of study who had entered Western academia. In the U.S., the long march of youthful activists through the universities (Jacoby 1987) was linked with a sea-change in the study of social protest (Lofland 1993:53), most concretely by Morris and Herring (1987:182-184), who interviewed a variety of theorists about their experience with the movements of the 1960s. "[W]hen you are participating, you inevitably look at it from the standpoint of participants," said one social-movement scholar. The collective behavior school struck him as "slightly insulting" and as "denigrating the motives of participants." "Since many social scientists sided with the activists and were debating issues of strategy and tactics, the irrationalist assumptions of the collective behavior approach seemed outmoded," wrote another social-movement theorist who participated in the paradigm shift (Zald 1992:331).

A further emphasis on meaning-making occurred in the 1990s, when the cultural turn in the social sciences reached the field of social movement studies. Cultural turners argued that the presumption of rationality offered a relatively narrow window onto the world-views of social movement participants. New approaches sought to incorporate collective identity, moral judgment, narrative structure, and other aspects of meaning-making into the study of social movements. These elements were not entirely lacking in earlier studies -- some examples follow in the next section of this introduction -- but they tended to be deemphasized. The new approaches sought to place meaning-making at the center of analysis, alongside social movement studies's usual subjects, such as political institutions and social structures.

The cultural turn conquered social movement studies (Kurzban 2004b). Leading the way was the concept of framing -- the cultural content and context of social movement messages (Benford and Snow 2000) -- was incorporated into the mainstream of the field, forming an oft-cited trinity with the concepts of political opportunity and mobilizing structures (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996). Former structuralists now embrace meaning-making concepts such as collective identity and narrative (Tilly 2002). From a dismissive approach at the turn of the 20th century, social movement studies has come to embrace meaning-making at the turn of the 21st century.

Meaning-making has been incorporated into all aspects of social movement studies. Research on social movement recruitment and participation, for example, relies heavily on the concept of collective identity. This has been a central focus of analysis since the 1970s, when the pioneers of social movement studies sought to understand collective action through the lens of social cleavages and categories (Oberschall 1973; Tilly 1978). In the 1980s, studies of the paradigm-setting case of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement emphasized the importance of pre-existing collective identities within the African-American

community (McAdam 1982/1999; Morris 1984). At the turn of the century, the concept of collective identity came to be seen not just as a precondition for successful social movement mobilization, but as part of the process of mobilization. Drawing on the insights of the collective behavior school and the new social movement approach -- though rarely calling them by these names, which had become anathema in mainstream social movement studies -- scholars examined how protestors built new collective identities (for example, Satterfield 2002), and how they joined movements in search of collective identities (for example, Jasper 1997).

Research on social movement organizations and activities also relies on analyses of meaning-making, such as the concept of social movement Repertoires@ (Traugott 1995). This concept refers to the finite but ever-changing set of activities that are culturally available to a social movement, in that they seem to be appropriate and feasible. That is, from the point of the social movement participants, these actions make sense. For example, democratic or consensus decision-making may serve a movement's ideals and self-understandings, as well as its strategic goals, notwithstanding outsiders' skepticism (Polletta 2002). Recent work has extended the concept of repertoires to include the organizational forms that movements adopt, which are also shaped by the ideas about organizations that are meaningful in a given situation (Clemens 1993; Davis, McAdam, Scott, and Zald 2005).

Research on social movement outcomes, as well, draws on meaning-making. Indeed, a long tradition in social movement studies and its precursors treats social change as the product of cultural innovation among small avant-gardes (Blumer 1939; Gusfield 1981; Rochon 1998). Even when movements fail at their stated goals, their ideals, discourse, and methods may survive and flourish (Giugni, McAdam, and Tilly 1999).

While the cultural turn conquered social movement studies, some of its most radical implications were lost in the process. Meaning-making was assimilated into an analytic framework of causes and effects that was built for earlier conceptual tools. In effect, meaning-making has been turned into a set of independent variables. Does a group have a strong sense of solidarity? Check. Does the movement have a message that resonates with core values? Check. Does the repertoire of protest match the structure of political opportunities? Check. This is an exaggeration, but not by much.

What if meaning-making were treated, not as a variable alongside other variables -- or even as a mechanism alongside other mechanisms, to use the new causal language proposed for social movement studies by McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) -- but rather as constitutive of all variables and mechanisms? Perhaps it is possible to examine how people's understandings of the world shape the way that they respond to the conditions and processes that academics may call variables and mechanisms. If people come to view their community's institutions as resources for social movement activism, for example, and they attempt to act on this understanding, then the understanding constitutes the resources as resources. The institutions themselves, as viewed by outside observers, are less important than the understandings of the activists and their rivals (Kurzman 1994).

If the history of social movement studies's treatment of meaning-making has shifted from dismissiveness to incorporation, perhaps it will shift next to enthronement. What would change if we adopted this approach? The papers in this special issue examine several answers to this question.

First, we might challenge the distinction between observer and observed in social movement studies. Many social movement scholars got into the field because of their experience or sympathy with activism of one form or another, but academic training frequently drums the do-good impulse out of graduate students. This was brought home to me some years ago when three activists visited my university office, asking if they could audit my seminar in social movement studies in order to improve their movement's effectiveness. I looked nervously at my syllabus and had to admit that the class probably wouldn't be of much use to them. Shelves of guidebooks for activists have been published, such as Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* (Alinsky 1971), but these are not much cited in the academic social movement literature.

[Summarize paper on knowledge production by movements.]

[Summarize paper on committed intellectuals.]

Second, privileging meaning-making might blur the distinction between social movements and other forms of resistance. Just as social movements have repertoires of protest, the field of social movement studies has a repertoire of recognition of protest: certain practices, such as demonstrations, are immediately indicative of the presence of social movements, while other practices are not necessarily associated with this category. [More to come.]

[Summarize paper on neglected movements and practices.]

[Summarize paper on cartographic practices.]

[Summarize paper on identity processes.]

[Fancy conclusion.]

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