INTRODUCTION
Meaning-Making in Social Movements

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Over the past century, the field of social movement studies has moved several times toward the recognition and analysis of meaning-making by social movement participants. It may be time, now, to make a new 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 section 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 imposition of meaning on the world is a goal in itself, a spur to action, and a site of contestation. 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.

Meaning-making might be conceptualized in two distinct and complementary theoretical registers. For methodological individualists, it refers to

human perception and response. Humans may identify, valuate, and engage with identical perceptual "inputs" in quite different ways, depending on the meanings that we associate with these inputs. The approach of a person with a gun may cause us to run, to smile, to attack, and so on—depending on the meanings that the person and the gun (and other aspects of the context) have for us at that moment. Meaning-making, in this regard, is the mental processing that makes sense out of the senses. It is both idiosyncratic to each person and each moment, and at the same time patterned across ever-changing sets of populations and instances.

For culturalists, by contrast, meaning-making refers to collective contest over interpretation. Institutions, repertoires, and rituals offer a set of ready-made—though always contradictory—interpretations that allow people to assimilate information into established categories of understanding. The recognition of human suffering, for example, may be interpreted in terms of inequality or stratification, exploitation or ability, responsibility or inevitability, and so on. It may lead to collective action to reduce suffering, or not, and the actions to reduce suffering may take any number of forms, depending on the meanings associated with the phenomenon. Notwithstanding variation and contestation, the range of meanings available in any given context is finite. Most societies have ready-made categories for individuals and small groups who make meanings outside of the dominant cultural set: visionaries, prophets, persons with mental illness, and the like.

Meaning-making is not limited to social movements. All action involves meaning-making, just as all action involves contention. However, 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 movements actively make meaning, challenging established meanings.

Social movement studies have not always stepped up to the challenge of meaning-making. The founding figures, according to the field's various genesis stories, generally ignored their subjects' meaning-making, in two ways. The first way held that the subjects were so different from the observer that their meaning-making was nonsensical, and therefore not worthy of analysis. This approach is evident in the "crowd psychology" of the late 19th cen-

tury, which is sometimes treated as the direct ancestor of social movement studies. For instance, Scipio Sighele, one of three major founders of this school of thought, based his analysis of "criminal crowds" on the "law" of hypnotic suggestibility, then extended the metaphor to all assemblies, including elected representatives, whose "intellectual level…, already quite humble, descends still further as a consequence of the law that we have enunciated" (Kurzman 2004b:129). Sighele's and other crowd psychologists' estimation of their own intellectual level was anything but humble, and they could not be bothered to treat their subjects as equivalent to themselves. They introduced examples of crowd beliefs chiefly for purposes of ridicule. This condescension was eventually drummed out of the field of collective behavior, which saw itself as the direct descendant of crowd psychology, in the l960s and 1970s (Couch 1968; McPhail 1991; Turner and Killian 1972). The dismissive attitude of crowd psychology seems unlikely to regain a significant place in the current climate of social movement studies, just as proposals for limited suffrage seem unlikely to regain momentum in the current climate of political ideologies. But then, climates can change.

A second way of avoiding the analysis of meaning-making stems from the presumption that the subjects are so similar to the observer that their meaning-making is more or less transparent, and therefore not worthy of study. For example, Karl Marx—sometimes considered a founder of social movement studies—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—ideology, culture, interpretation, and so on—into his theoretical system in any extended way. In addition, Marx was 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, only factual assessments of working conditions and social life (Marx 1880). The potential for collective action was presumably to be read off of these "objective" indicators, on the supposition that workers would eventually interpret their conditions in the same way that Marx did.

This avoidance of meaning-making was revived, not buried, when activists and their supporters created the field of "social movement studies" in the 1970s (Morris and Herring 1987). This new field sought to examine social movements from the perspective of participants, rejecting the pre-

sumption of irrationality that earlier generations of scholars had attributed to activists. Instead, they insisted on the rationality of protest, an insistence that grew out of an identification with social movement participants. An unintended consequence of this identification was the downplaying of movements' meaning-making. Since observers and subjects were treated as sharing the same sort of rationality, analyses did not need to delve into how movements made sense of their surroundings, but focused primarily on what the surroundings were—the structures in which individuals operated, rather than the world-views that allowed these structures to operate. For example, one central concept, political opportunities, emphasized shifts in repression and accommodation. According to studies that emphasized this concept, movement activism ebbed and flowed correspondingly, driven by calculations of efficacy that more or less mirrored the scholarly assessment (Kurzman 1996). The alignment of the perspectives of the observer and the observed was abetted by the relative neglect of social movements that the researchers did not support, and of social movements in political and cultural settings that differed substantially from the researchers' home territory.

Meaning-making never fully disappeared behind the curtain of rationality. The field accommodated studies that emphasized culture, social-psychological approaches, and ideological subjects such as framing. However, these matters were safely incorporated into a structuralist framework built on rationalist presumptions. In the 1990s, this framework began to crumble. Several trends converged to undermine structuralist rationalism within social movement studies. The field began to take notice of new sorts of movements, such as movements that emphasized identity and culture rather than political rights or state power. In addition, the field began to address concerns foregrounded by the cultural turn within the social sciences at large. Cultural turners argued that the presumption of rationality offered a relatively narrow window into 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, 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.

Leading the way was the concept of "framing"—the cultural content and context of social movement messages (Benford and Snow 2000)—

which 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 (Kurzman 2004a).

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 (Amenta 2006; Giugni, McAdam, and Tilly 1999).

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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 may be 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 academic observers, are less important than the understandings of the activists and their rivals (Kurzman 1994).

If the history of social movement studies' treatment of meaning-making has shifted from dismissiveness to incorporation, perhaps it will shift next to privilege (see also Rubin 2004). What would change if we adopted this approach? The papers in this special section offer a variety of suggestions, plus at least two overarching contributions.

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 literature on social movements.

The paper by Casas-Cortés, Osterweil, and Powell in this special section, for example, focuses on acts of knowledge-production that are central means and ends for numerous social movements of the present era, and possibly—they suggest—for social movements of all eras. Movements' struggles to analyze themselves and to contribute to scientific debates place them in direct competition with academics outside of the movement, who may have a vested professional interest in downplaying activist knowledge-production or segregating this knowledge-production as an object of analysis that is distinct from their own scholarly acts of analysis. The field of social movement studies has much to learn, the authors argue, from the field of science and technology studies, which has grappled with the relevance of its subjects' knowledge-production for a generation (see, for example, Hess 2007). This paper forms part of a new generation of social movement scholarship that maintains dual loyalties both to academia and to activism.

The paper by Aparicio and Blaser highlights efforts to transcend the dichotomy between observer and observed in Latin America. The region has a decades-long tradition of "committed intellectuals" who valorize the knowledge-production of subalterns, but in recent years a small cadre of scholars and activists has gone even further to recognize and develop "subjugated knowledges" that lie outside of modern conceptual frameworks such as neo-liberalism and leftism. In particular, a series of academic/activist partnerships has emerged around movements whose primary intellectual commitment is to the epistemic worlds of the indigenous peoples of Latin America. These partnerships remain experimental, the paper argues, but they are potentially significant for the incorporation of activists' world-views into the academic analysis of movements—not just as objects of study but also as agents of study, not just as confirmations of academic perspectives but also as alternative perspectives.

In addition to blurring the boundaries between observer and observed, privileging meaning-making might also blur the distinction between social

movements and other forms of collective action. Just as social movements generally adhere to specific repertoires of protest, the field of social movement studies has a standard 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. In recent years, for example, Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly (1996, 2001) have attempted to broaden the scope of social movement studies to include "contentious politics" of all sorts, of which social movements constitute just one form. Others have expanded the lens of social movement studies to analyze such subjects as "consensus mobilization" that verges on policy lobbying (McCarthy and Wolfson 1992) and such macro-historical changes such as secularization (Smith 2003).

The paper by Price, Fox Tree, and Nonini proposes a significant further expansion of the definition of social movements to include "grounded utopian movements." These movements do not necessarily involve political protest of the sort that is typically recognized as social movement activism; indeed their goals are in some ways anti-political, seeking autonomy from the state, and their mobilization is informal, segmentary, and heterarchical, not institutionalized through bureaucratic organizations. These movements aim to reshape their communities outside of the logic of the nation-state and global capitalism—challenging the universalizing aspirations of these institutions from the geographic and social margins, much as "new social movements" and the global social justice movement challenge these institutions from within. Anthropologists have long studied such phenomena, under the rubric of millenarian or revitalization movements, but the paper brings this tradition into conversation with the mainstream of social movement studies, highlighting the broader processes of contradiction and resistance generated by state formation and capitalist expansion. The paper warns against fetishizing meaning-making to the neglect of these material and structural factors.

The paper by Holland, Fox, and Daro examines another aspect of the boundary between social movements and non-movements: the process by which activists come to create a collective identity that constitutes themselves as a movement. The paper builds on the significant work in social movement studies over the past generation on the role of collective identities as resources for activism and as outcomes of activism (McDonald 2002; Polletta and Jasper 2001). The paper argues that collective identity may also be seen, not as cause or effect, but as part of the process through

which social movements come to exist and endure as social movements. The paper offers three examples of this process: the use of cultural artifacts, such as innovative festival songs in Nepal that distinguish between movement participants and other identities; confrontations with outsiders' attempts to pin unpopular labels on a movement; and the internal divisions that can emerge and undermine collective identity after a movement success. These processes involve ongoing dialogic struggles over identity—between activists and fellow community members, activists and opponents, or activists and activists—that are never resolved as neatly as the reifying label of "social movement" would suggest.

These papers emerged from the Social Movements Working Group at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which has provided a forum over the past three years for graduate students, post-doctoral fellows, and faculty in anthropology and other disciplines to engage with the literature on social movements, social movement activists, and social movement scholars from around the world. Through these encounters, the authors have sought to build on the intersections between three sorts of questions: those posed in mainstream social movement studies, which tend to be focused on categories and causes; those posed in activist circles, which tend to be focused on strategies and tactics; and those posed in anthropological and post-structuralist theory, which have involved novel approaches to issues of meaning-making over the past generation. These papers by no means exhaust the possibilities for meaning-centered analyses of social movements, but they offer provocative suggestions for anthropology and for social movement studies more broadly.

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