

of one's time. Private life has its own legitimate demands, and caring for a sick child or an aging parent may take precedence over demonstrating for a cause in which one fully believes.

Finally, there is the matter of opportunity. Changes in the broader political structure and climate may open or close the chance for collective action to have an impact. External events and crises, broad shifts in public sentiment, and electoral changes and rhythms all have a heavy influence on whether political consciousness ever gets translated into action. In sum, the absence of a political consciousness that supports collective action can, at best, explain only one part of people's quiescence.

Lest we be too impressed by the inactivity of most people, the history of social movements is a reminder of those occasions when people do become mobilized and engage in various forms of collective action. In spite of all the obstacles, it occurs regularly and frequently surprises observers who were overly impressed by an earlier quiescence. These movements always offer one or more *collective action* frames. These frames, to quote Snow and Benford (1992), are "action oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate social movement activities and campaigns."<sup>1</sup> They offer ways of understanding that imply the need for and desirability of some form of action. Movements may have internal battles over which particular frame will prevail or may offer several frames for different constituencies, but they all have in common the implication that those who share the frame can and should take action.

This book looks carefully at three components of these collective action frames: (1) *injustice*, (2) *agency*, and (3) *identity*. The *injustice component* refers to the moral indignation expressed in this form of political consciousness. This is not merely a cognitive or intellectual judgment about what is equitable but also what cognitive psychologists call a *hot cognition* – one that is laden with emotion (see Zajonc, 1980). An injustice frame requires a consciousness of motivated human actors who carry some of the onus for bringing about harm and suffering.

The *agency component* refers to the consciousness that it is possible to alter conditions or policies through collective action. Collective action frames imply some sense of collective efficacy and deny the immutability of some undesirable situation. They empower people by defining them as potential agents of their own history. They suggest not merely that something can be done but that "we" can do something.

The *identity component* refers to the process of defining this "we," typically in opposition to some "they" who have different interests or values. Without an adversarial component, the potential target of collective action is likely to remain an abstraction – hunger, disease, poverty, or war, for

example. Collective action requires a consciousness of human agents whose policies or practices must be changed and a "we" who will help to bring the change about.

It is easy to find evidence of all of these components when one looks at the pamphlets and speeches of movement activists. This book asks about their broader cultural presence in understanding public affairs. Looking closely at four quite different issues, it asks about the presence of these collective action components in both mass media commentary and the conversations of working people about them. To what extent do the dominant media frames emphasize injustice, for example? To what extent do the frames constructed in conversations emphasize this component? The answers to these questions tell us both about the mobilization potential in popular understanding of these issues and about the contribution of media discourse in nurturing or stifling it.

#### **The four issues**

Each of the four issues is the subject of a long and continuing public discourse: affirmative action, nuclear power, troubled industry, and Arab-Israeli conflict. Each is enormously complex in its own way and quite different from the others. Arab-Israeli conflict is relatively remote from the everyday experience of most people compared to affirmative action. Troubled industry and affirmative action have a high potential for tapping class and ethnic identifications, but nuclear power does not appear to engage any major social cleavage in American society. Nuclear power, more than the other issues, includes claims of privileged knowledge by technical experts.

In the course of the research, I learned what I should have known from the outset: These apparent characteristics of issues that my colleagues and I used in selecting them were our own social constructions and not an intrinsic property of the issues. Whether an issue touches people's daily lives, for example, depends on the meaning it has for them. One person's proximate issue is remote for the next person; with a vivid imagination or a convincing analysis of structural effects, an issue that might initially appear remote can be brought home to one's daily life. Similar observations can be made about the other dimensions as well. Whether an issue is technical or not is a matter of how it is framed, not an intrinsic characteristic; the relevance of social cleavages is a matter of interpretation.

This complicates the analysis but, in general, the issues did provide substantial variety. Our *a priori* construction of meaning on these issues was close to the mark for most people, in spite of a few surprises. The