

uals and groups to engage in political communication because of the nature of their linguistic environment (a restricted speech code) and not because of any apparent political intervention" (Mueller, 1973, 19). This time, it is not the consciousness industry that victimizes them, but a class structure that denies them the linguistic and conceptual ability to discern the political nature of problems that are disguised as individual or technical ones. In sum, critics and defenders of American society argue over who is to blame for the ignorance of working people – but the message in this book is that they aren't so dumb.

I do not deny the handicaps or argue that people are well served by the mass media in their efforts to make sense of the world. The limitations that media critics have pointed out are real and are reflected in the frames that people are able to construct on many issues. Frames that are present in social movement discourse but are invisible in mass media commentary rarely find their way into their conversations. Systematic omissions make certain ways of framing issues extremely unlikely. Yet people read media messages in complicated and sometimes unpredictable ways, and draw heavily on other resources as well in constructing meaning.

### **Collective action frames**

As a student of and a participant in various social movements, I have had a continuing concern with the development of a particular type of political consciousness – one that supports participation in collective action. There are many political movements that try in vain to activate people who, in terms of some allegedly objective interest, ought to be up in arms. Like many observers, I watch in dismay as people ignore causes that are dear to my heart, obstinately pursuing their daily lives rather than making history.

I know, of course, that collective action is more than just a matter of political consciousness. One may be completely convinced of the desirability of changing a situation while gravely doubting the possibility of changing it. Beliefs about efficacy are at least as important as understanding what social changes are needed. Furthermore, we know from many studies of social movements how important social networks are for recruiting people and drawing them into political action with their friends. People sometimes act first, and only through participating develop the political consciousness that supports the action.

Personal costs also deter people from participating, notwithstanding their agreement with a movement's political analysis. Action may be risky or, at a minimum, require foregoing other more pleasurable or profitable uses

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