

## Chapter 5

# Constructing Social Protest

*William A. Gamson*

Movement activists are media junkies. “Advocates of causes,” Edelman reminds us, “are an avid audience for the political spectacle” (1988: 6). Along with other political actors, they eagerly monitor public discourse, using it along with other resources to construct meaning on issues they care about. Media discourse provides them with “weekly, daily, sometimes hourly triumphs and defeats, grounds for hope and for fear, a potpourri of happenings that mark trends and aberrations, some of them historic.”

The more sophisticated among them recognize that many in their constituency—the potential challengers whom they would like to reach—are different from them. Hopes and defeats are defined by their everyday lives, not by public affairs, and their involvement with the political spectacle is more casual and haphazardly attentive. The trick for activists is to bridge public discourse and people’s experiential knowledge, integrating them in a coherent frame that supports and sustains collective action.

General-audience media are only one forum for public discourse, but they are the central one for social movements. Activists may read a variety of movement publications and attend meetings and conferences where the issues that concern them are discussed. But they cannot assume that their constituency shares these other forums or is aware of this discourse. Only general-audience media provide a potentially shared public discourse.

Of course, one can assume more sharing than exists on many issues. Two people reading the same newspaper may end up with virtually no overlap in what they process from it. But on major events, the potential is often realized. Someone speaking on neglect of the cities and racial injustice in American society in the wake of the Rodney King verdict and the ensuing Los Angeles riot can reasonably assume media-based, shared images of these events. I do

not mean to imply here that the *meanings* are shared, but one can draw on this public discourse to frame an issue with some assurance that potential challengers will understand the references and allusions.

This essay focuses on how the nature of media discourse influences the construction of collective action frames by social movements. Like Gitlin (1980), it asks how the media influence movements, but the focus is less on choice of mediagenic action strategies and the generation of media-based leadership and more on how this cultural tool affects the process of constructing meaning. It reverses the questions addressed by Gamson (1988) and Ryan (1991) on how movements attempt to influence media discourse as the central site of a symbolic struggle over which framing of an issue will prevail.

### Media Discourse as a Framing Resource

Imagine a group of ordinary working people carrying on a conversation in which they are trying to figure out how they think about some complex public issue. The issue is a forest through which they must find their way—but not a virgin forest. The various frames in media discourse provide maps indicating useful points of entry, provide signposts at various crossroads, highlight the significant landmarks, and warn of the perils of other paths. Many people, however, do not stick to the pathways provided, frequently wandering off and making paths of their own.

From the standpoint of the wanderer, media discourse is a cultural resource to use in understanding and talking about an issue, but it is only one of several available. Nor is it necessarily the most important one on some issues, compared, for example, with their own experience and that of significant others in their lives. Frequently, they find their way through the forest with a combination of resources, including those they carry with them.

Elsewhere I describe conversations among about forty groups of non-college-educated people in the Boston area on four issues: troubled industry, affirmative action, nuclear power, and Arab-Israeli conflict. "Every group on every issue shows some awareness that there is a public discourse around them, even if they make minimal use of it and frequently apologize for not having better command of it" (Gamson 1992). On some issues, I found that media discourse was the main or even the exclusive resource used in constructing meaning, with experiential knowledge playing little role.

The public discourse on which people draw is much broader than the news. They quote advertising slogans and refer to movies. Nor do they confine the media discourse on which they draw to the issue under discussion

but frequently bring in other related issues to make their point. They also make use of media discourse on the issue under discussion, employing catch-phrases, making references to the players featured in news accounts, and bringing in a variety of informational elements to support the frames that spotlight these facts.

Any single resource has its limits. A frame has a more solid foundation when it is based on a combination of cultural and personal resources. Let me concede that no resource is purely personal or cultural. Even our personal experience is filtered through a cultural lens. "Big Brother is you, watching" in Miller's (1988) clever phrase. We walk around with hyperreal images from movies and television and use them to code our own experiences. Media discourse is not merely something out there but also something inside our heads.

Similarly, people bring their own experiences and personal associations to their readings of cultural texts. Media images have no fixed meaning but involve a negotiation with a heterogeneous audience that may provide them with meanings quite different from the preferred reading. Oppositional and aberrant readings are common and, hence, media images are not purely cultural but infused with personal meanings as well.

Nevertheless, the mix of cultural and personal varies dramatically among different types of resources. Our experiences may have cultural elements but they are overwhelmingly our own private resources, not fully shared by others. People distinguish between knowing something from having experienced it and knowing something secondhand or more abstractly, and they generally give a privileged place to their own experiential knowledge. Experiential knowledge is valued precisely because it is so direct and relatively unmediated. While there is plenty of selectivity in the memory of experiences, it is our own selectivity, not someone else's.

Media discourse, at the other extreme, is a useful resource precisely because it is public. In spite of personal elements, it is possible to talk about the beating of Rodney King, for example, on the basis of assumed common images and factual knowledge. If everyone may not know the particular element of media discourse referred to, it is nonetheless a matter of public record, available to anyone who wants to know: you can look it up—unlike personal experience. Media discourse, then, is predominantly a cultural resource.

Iyengar and Kinder (1987) offer experimental evidence of the special impact of integrating the personal and cultural. First, they review a large number of studies that show that Americans sharply distinguish the quality of

their personal lives from their judgments about public issues. For example, crime victims do not regard crime as a more serious problem for society as a whole than do those who are personally untouched by crime; people's assessments of economic conditions are largely unrelated to the economic setbacks and gains in their own lives; and the war in Vietnam was not rated as a more important problem among those who had close relatives serving there than among Americans without personal connections to the war.

The researchers then designed a series of experiments to test more subtle connections between media coverage and personal effects. One experiment concentrated on three issues—civil rights, unemployment, and Social Security. They showed edited television news broadcasts to their subjects, varying the amount of coverage of these issues systematically. (Stories on a variety of other issues were included as well.) In different conditions, subjects saw either no coverage, intermediate coverage, or extensive coverage of each of the three issues.

The subjects varied on whether they were in a category that was personally affected. Blacks were contrasted with whites on civil rights, those out of work with those currently working on the unemployment issue, and the elderly with the young on Social Security. All subjects were asked at the end to name the most important problems that the country faced.

The researchers found that on two of the three issues—civil rights and Social Security—members of the personally affected group were especially influenced by the amount of television coverage they watched. On the unemployment issue, they found no differences between the employed and the unemployed. Only this last result is consistent with the earlier studies showing the lack of relationship between people's personal lives and their views on public issues.

Iyengar and Kinder interpret their results in ways that suggest the integration of personal and cultural resources. "We suspect" they write, "that the key feature distinguishing civil rights and social security is that they are experienced psychologically both as personal predicaments and as *group* predicaments." Although they do not use the term, collective identity processes that do not operate on unemployment come into play. Presumably, being an African-American or a senior citizen engages individuals in a collective identity, but being unemployed does not. On civil rights and Social Security, then, it is not merely that "I" am affected, but also that "we" are affected. And "we" are especially sensitive and responsive to media coverage that suggests that "our" problem is an important problem for the country.

In sum, by failing to use media discourse and experiential knowledge

together in constructing a frame, people are unable to bridge the personal and cultural and to anchor their understanding in both. When they fail to link their media-based understanding of an issue with experiential knowledge, their issue understanding is ad hoc and separated from their daily lives. Hence, there is a special robustness to frames that are held together with a full combination of resources.

### Collective Action Frames

We 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. 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, their agreement with a movement's political analysis notwithstanding. Action may be risky or, at a minimum, require forgoing other more pleasurable or profitable uses of 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 and 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.

Collective action 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 and desirability of some form of action. Movements may have inter-

nal battles over which particular frame will prevail or may offer several frames for different constituencies, but they will all have in common the implication that those who share the frame can and should take action.

Gamson (1992) suggests three components of these collective action frames: injustice, agency, and 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 is what cognitive psychologists call a "hot cognition"—one that is laden with emotion (see, for example, 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 about change.

To understand the role of media discourse in nurturing or stifling collective action frames, I will examine how it affects each of the individual components. Since different aspects of media discourse are relevant for each, we must distinguish between the framing and salience of the issue and the movement. While there is some mutual influence of issue- and movement-framing activities, they can vary independently. One can frame the anti-Vietnam War movement negatively while embracing an antiwar frame. One can repudiate the actions of rioters in Los Angeles and elsewhere while endorsing a racial injustice frame on the condition of U.S. cities. It is always possible to accept the message and reject the messenger.

### **Injustice**

For injustice frames, it is the framing and salience of the issue, not the movement, that is relevant. The media role in fostering or retarding injustice frames is complex and double-edged. Hardships and inequities can be presented in ways that stimulate many different emotions: compassion, cyni-

cism, bemused irony, and resignation, for example. Injustice focuses on the kind of righteous anger that puts fire in the belly and iron in the soul. Injustice, as I argued earlier, is a hot cognition, not merely an abstract intellectual judgment about what is equitable.

The heat of a moral judgment is intimately related to beliefs about what acts or conditions have caused people to suffer undeserved hardship or loss. The critical dimension is the abstractness of the target. Vague and abstract sources of unfairness diffuse indignation and make it seem foolish. We may think it dreadfully unfair when it rains on our parade, but bad luck and nature are poor targets for an injustice frame. When impersonal and abstract forces are responsible for our suffering, we are taught to accept what cannot be changed and make the best of it. Anger is dampened by the unanswerable rhetorical question, Who says life is fair?

At the other extreme, if one attributes undeserved suffering to malicious or selfish acts by clearly identifiable persons or groups, the emotional component of an injustice frame will almost certainly be there. Concreteness in the target, even when it is misplaced and directed away from the real causes of hardship, is a necessary condition for an injustice frame. Hence, competition over defining targets is a crucial battleground in the development or containment of injustice frames.

More specifically, an injustice frame requires that motivated human actors carry some of the onus for bringing about harm and suffering. These actors may be corporations, government agencies, or specifiable groups rather than individuals. They may be presented as malicious, but selfishness, greed, and indifference may be sufficient to produce indignation.

An injustice frame does not require that the actors who are responsible for the condition be autonomous. They may be depicted as constrained by past actions of others and by more abstract forces, as long as they have some role as agents in bringing about or continuing the wrongful injury. From the standpoint of those who wish to control or discourage the development of injustice frames, symbolic strategies should emphasize abstract targets that render human agency as invisible as possible. Reification helps to accomplish this by blaming actorless entities such as "the system," "society," "life," and "human nature."

If reification does not prevent the development of an injustice frame, a second line of defense involves accepting human agency while diverting the focus toward external targets or internal opponents. Righteous anger cannot always be prevented, but it may still be channeled safely and perhaps even used to further one's purposes. Some sponsors of conservative frames

claimed, for example, that the social welfare programs of the 1960s caused the 1992 Los Angeles riots.

For those who would encourage collective action, these strategies of social control provide a formidable dilemma. The conditions of people's daily lives are, in fact, determined by abstract sociocultural forces that are largely invisible to them. Critical views of "the system," however accurate, may still encourage reification just as much as benign ones as long as they lack a focus on human actors.

The antidote to excessive abstraction has its own problems. In concretizing the targets of an injustice frame, there is a danger that people will miss the underlying structural conditions that produce hardship and inequality. They may exaggerate the role of human actors, failing to understand broader structural constraints, and misdirect their anger at easy and inappropriate targets.

There is no easy path between the cold cognition of an overdetermined structural analysis and the hot cognition of misplaced concreteness. As long as human actors are not central in understanding the conditions that produce hardship and suffering, we can expect little righteous anger. Targets of collective action will remain unfocused. As long as moral indignation is narrowly focused on human actors without regard to the broader structure in which they operate, injustice frames will be a poor tool for collective action, leading to ineffectiveness and frustration, perhaps creating new victims of injustice.

To sustain collective action, the targets identified by the frame must successfully bridge the abstract and the concrete. By connecting broader sociocultural forces with human agents who are appropriate targets of collective action, one can get the heat into the cognition. By making sure that the concrete targets are linked to and can affect the broader forces, one can make sure that the heat is not misdirected in ways that will leave the underlying source of injustice untouched.

Media practices have a double-edged effect in both stimulating and discouraging injustice frames. The extent to which they do one or the other differs substantially from issue to issue. But some framing practices cut across issues and operate more generally.

Some encouragement of injustice frames is built into the narrative form that dominates news reporting. Most journalists understand that news writing is storytelling, but sometimes it is made explicit. Edward Epstein describes a memo that Reuven Frank sent to his staff at NBC News: "Every news story should, without any sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, of drama" (1973, 241). Stories were to be organized

around the triad of "conflict, problem, and denouement" with "rising action" building to a climax.

This dependence on the narrative form has implications for promoting an injustice frame. Narratives focus attention on motivated actors rather than structural causes of events. As new events unfold and changes appear in the conditions of people's daily lives, human agents are typically identified as causal agents in a morality play about good and evil or honesty and corruption. The more abstract analysis of sociocultural forces favored by social scientists is deemphasized if it enters the story at all.

Media emphasis on narrative form, then, tends to concretize targets in ways that would appear to abet injustice frames. Far from serving the social control needs of authorities in this instance, media coverage frequently gives people reasons to get angry at somebody. Of course, that "somebody" need not be the real source of grievance at all but merely a convenient surrogate. Nevertheless, however righteous indignation may get channeled, media discourse on many issues quite inadvertently helps to generate it by providing concrete targets. Hence it is an obstacle to social control strategies that diffuse a sense of injustice by moving the causes of undeserved hardship beyond human agency.

At the same time, the personalization of responsibility may have the effect of blurring broader power relations and the structural causes of a bad situation. Many writers have argued that the total media experience leads to the fragmentation of meaning. News comes in quotations with ever shorter sound bites. The preoccupation with immediacy results in a proliferation of fleeting, ephemeral images that have no ability to sustain any coherent organizing frame to provide meaning over time. The "action news" formula adopted by many local news programs packs thirty to forty short, fast items into a twenty-two-and-a-half-minute "newshole"—"one minute-thirty for World War III," as one critic described it (Diamond 1975).

Bennett analyzes the news product as a result of journalistic practices that combine to produce fragmentation and confusion. "The fragmentation of information begins," he argues, "by emphasizing individual actors over the political contexts in which they operate. Fragmentation is then heightened by the use of dramatic formats that turn events into self-contained, isolated happenings." The result is news that comes to us in "sketchy dramatic capsules that make it difficult to see the connections across issues or even to follow the development of a particular issue over time" (1988: 24). Hence the structure and operation of societal power relations remain obscure and invisible.

Iyengar (1991) provides experimental evidence on how the episodic nature of media reporting on most issues affects attributions of responsibility. He contrasts two forms of presentation—the “episodic” and the “thematic.” The episodic form—by far the most common one—“takes the form of a case study or event-oriented report and depicts public issues in terms of concrete instances.” In contrast, the much rarer thematic form emphasizes general outcomes, conditions, and statistical evidence.

By altering the format of television reports about several different political issues as presented to experimental and control groups, Iyengar shows how people’s attributions of responsibility are affected. More specifically, he shows that exposure to the episodic format makes viewers less likely to hold public officials accountable for the existence of some problem and less likely to hold them responsible for alleviating it.

The implication of this line of argument is that if people simply relied on the media, it would be difficult to find any coherent frame at all, let alone an injustice frame. The metanarrative is frequently about the self-reforming nature of the system, operating to get rid of the rotten apples that the news media have exposed. If moral indignation is stimulated by fingering the bad guys, it is quickly and safely assuaged by their removal.

These complicated and offsetting characteristics force one to look closely at how media discourse treats the injustice theme on specific issues. Gamson (1992) found central and highly visible injustice frames in media discourse on affirmative action but very low visibility for injustice frames on nuclear power and Arab-Israeli conflict. Injustice frames were present in media discourse on the troubled steel industry, but the targets offered for indignation were selected ones, supporting some frames much more than others. Media-designated targets included the Japanese, for taking away the jobs of American workers, and the “Nader juggernaut,” for forcing expensive health and safety regulations on American industry, but did not include the disinvestment decisions of U.S. steel companies.

### Agency

What does it mean when demonstrators chant, “The whole world is watching”? It means that they matter—that they are making history. The media spotlight validates the fact that they are important players. Conversely, a demonstration with no media coverage at all is a nonevent, unlikely to have any positive influence on either mobilizing potential challengers or influencing any target. No news is bad news.

For this component of collective action frames, it is mainly attention that matters. How the issue is framed or even whether the movement is framed positively or negatively is irrelevant; the salience of the movement is the variable of interest. Potential challengers in the audience get the message that this group is taken seriously and must be dealt with in some way. Arrests and suppression only confirm the fact that they are important enough to be a threat to authorities. The content that matters with respect to agency is about the power of the movement and the ability of authorities to control it. The media role in this is, as usual, complicated.

The forces that discourage a sense of agency among ordinary citizens in most societies are overwhelming. Culture and social structure combine to induce collective helplessness. The vast majority seem condemned to remain subject to sociocultural forces that systematically remove from their consciousness any sense that they can collectively alter the conditions and terms of their daily lives.

Most of us, even those with political activist identities, spend most of our time and energy on sustaining our daily lives. Flacks points out that this includes not only meeting material needs but also “activity and experience designed to sustain one’s self as a human being—to validate or fulfill the meaning of one’s life, reinforce or enhance one’s sense of self-worth, [and] achieve satisfaction and pleasure” (1988: 2). This daily activity typically takes for granted and reinforces the patterned daily life characteristic of a community or society; only very rarely do people have an opportunity to engage in activity that challenges or tries to change some aspect of this pattern—what Flacks calls “making history.”

As long as history making is centralized and hierarchical, with very little opportunity for people to participate in any of the institutions that set the conditions of their daily lives, they will inevitably feel “that they themselves are objects of historical forces alien to themselves, that they themselves are without power” (Flacks 1988: 5). Everyday life and history are experienced as separate realms because we have a national political economy that is dominated by centralized, hierarchical, national corporations and a national state.

This structural impediment to collective agency is reinforced by a political culture that operates to produce quiescence and passivity. Merelman tells us:

[A] loosely bounded culture prevents Americans from controlling their political and social destinies, for the world which loose boundedness portrays is not the world of political and social structures that actually exists. It is, instead, a shadowland, which gives Americans little real purchase on the massive, hierarchical political and economic structures that dominate their lives. (1984: 1)

He analyzes the role of television in particular in promoting a loosely bounded culture that backs people away from politics and directs them toward a private vision of the self in the world.

Edelman (1988) points to the powerful social control that is exercised, largely unconsciously, through the manipulation of symbolism used in "constructing the political spectacle." Problems, enemies, crises, and leaders are constantly being constructed and reconstructed to create a series of threats and reassurances. To take it in is to be taken in by it. "For most of the human race," he writes in his conclusion, "political history has been a record of the triumph of mystification over strategies to maximize well-being." Rebellious collective action can even buttress the dominant worldview by helping political elites in their construction of a stable enemy or threat that justifies their policies and provides a legitimation for political repression.

Bennett observes how the structure and culture of news production combine to limit popular participation:

As long as the distribution of power is narrow and decision processes are closed, journalists will never be free of their dependence on the small group of public relations experts, official spokespersons, and powerful leaders whose self-serving pronouncements have become firmly established as the bulk of the daily news. (1988: xii)

Furthermore, these "advertisements for authority" are surrounded by other reports "that convey fearful images of violent crime, economic insecurity, and nuclear war. Such images reinforce public support for political authorities who promise order, security, and responsive political solutions." Granting that people take it all with a grain of salt, he argues that even minimal acceptance of basic assumptions about political reality is enough to discourage most people from participating actively in the political process.

It is no wonder, Bennett concludes, that few Americans become involved politically and "most cannot imagine how they could make a political difference." One can break out by reading specialized publications with a broader range of discourse, but "those who take the time to do so may find themselves unable to communicate with the majority who remain trapped on the other side of the wall of mass media imagery" (1988: xv). Gans, reviewing the many reasons for people to avoid political activities, is led to conclude that "it is surprising to find any citizen activity taking place at all" (1988: 70).

And yet it does. There are clearly moments when people do take it upon themselves to do more than evade or transcend the terms and conditions of their daily lives and behave as collective agents who can change them. At

some level, they harbor a sense of potential agency. Are social scientists, in emphasizing how this culture of quiescence is produced and maintained, themselves promulgating yet another set of reasons for inaction, another discouragement to agency? Where are the cracks in which some idea of collective agency stays alive, ready to grow and prosper under the proper conditions, as it did so dramatically and to everyone's surprise in Eastern Europe, for example?

I accept the claim that American media discourse systematically discourages the idea that ordinary citizens can alter the conditions and terms of their daily lives through their own actions. But this message comes through more equivocally on some issues than on others, and in some special contexts a sense of collective agency is even nurtured.

Among the four issues (troubled industry, affirmative action, nuclear power, Arab-Israeli conflict) discussed in Gamson (1992), the generalization seems strongest for media discourse on problems in the steel industry. One media sample covered a moment of significant citizen action—a community effort by workers and other citizens in the Mahoning Valley area in Ohio to buy and run Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company. Sheet and Tube had been acquired in 1969 by a New Orleans-based conglomerate, the Lykes Corporation, which had used it as a "cash cow." Rather than modernizing the plant, Lykes used its cash flow to service the debt it had assumed in buying Sheet and Tube and to finance other new acquisitions.

By 1977, Lykes tried to sell the depleted company but found no buyers among other foreign and domestic steel companies; in September, it announced that it would permanently close its largest mill in the area and lay off 4,100 employees. An estimated 3,600 additional jobs would be lost through effects on local suppliers and retail businesses. Meanwhile, the United Steelworkers of America, with its primary weapon, the strike, rendered largely useless by changes in the worldwide steel industry, tried desperately to hold on to the gains it had won in the past, but seemed incapable of any initiative.

In response, a broad group of religious leaders formed the Ecumenical Coalition of the Mahoning Valley to search for a solution to the crisis. At the suggestion of local steelworkers, they began to explore the possibility of a combined worker-community buyout. Alperovitz and Faux describe the action as embodying "concerns for jobs rather than welfare, for self-help and widespread participation rather than dependence on absentee decision-makers" (1982, 355).

The new company was to be known as Community Steel, directed by a fifteen-member board with six members elected by the company's workers,

six by stockholders, and three by a broadly based community corporation. Thousands of residents pledged savings to a fund that would purchase the factory, and the coalition received a grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to conduct a feasibility study. Eventually, the plan faltered when the Carter administration failed to support the needed loan guarantees, but the two-year Youngstown effort was clearly the largest and most significant attempt to convert a plant to worker-community ownership.

Was it visible in national media discourse? When they are covering a continuing issue such as the decline of the troubled steel industry, journalists look for a topical peg on which they can hang their stories. The Carter administration provided one when it offered a six-point plan to deal with the problems of the steel industry in the late fall of 1977. If there was a story in the Youngstown effort begun a couple of months earlier, this was an excellent opportunity to include it. It was receiving extensive coverage in local media. Grassroots efforts of this sort are novel enough, and it was too soon to know what the outcome would be. HUD secretary Patricia Harris was calling for "new models of community involvement to solve these problems" (Alperovitz and Faux 1982: 355). One might expect that the normal assumption in media discourse that citizen action is irrelevant might well be suspended in such an instance.

A two-week sample of media commentary in fifty daily newspapers, three major television networks, and three major newsmagazines found no references or allusions to citizen action in the Mahoning Valley in the heart of the steel industry. Workers who appear in this commentary are passive; they are never the subject of what is happening, always its unfortunate object. Even their status as victims is sometimes challenged. Columnist James Reston thought they partly brought it on themselves; he chided American workers who "increasingly condemn the integrity of work and reject the authority of their managers" and quoted approvingly from a former Nixon administration Labor Department official who claimed that workers "no longer think that hard work pays off" and "increasingly resist authority in their companies, communities, churches, or governments" (*New York Times*, December 2, 1977).

On affirmative action, citizen action was visible when an administration sympathetic to the civil rights movement was in power and became largely invisible when official discourse turned unsympathetic. Official sympathy for citizen action, then, may alter its normal disparagement or invisibility and encourage journalists to treat collective actors as if they were relevant players in the policy arena.

On nuclear power, citizen action became and remained visible in spite of an official discourse that belittled it and attempted to diminish its importance. Apparently, there are circumstances in which media discourse will portray a movement as a significant actor even without official encouragement. On nuclear power, in particular, a strong case could be made that media discourse has been more help than hindrance to the antinuclear movement. It serves no official agenda to have antinuke protesters taken so seriously that they provide potential models for the next community targeted for construction of a nuclear reactor. Indeed, officials in industry and government who might consider commissioning a new nuclear reactor must certainly be deterred by the likely prospect of prolonged local protest with extensive media coverage.

Media-amplified images of successful citizen action on one issue can generalize and transfer to other issues. The repertoire of collective action presented on a broad range of political issues in media discourse—of boycotts, strikes, and demonstrations, for example—can easily be divorced from the particular context in which it is presented and adapted to other issues. Gamson (1992) concludes that "the media role in portraying collective agency seems, to a substantial degree, issue specific and variable rather than constant."

But none of this evidence contradicts Gitlin's (1980) observations on the type of collective action that will draw the media spotlight. Between the sustained but unspectacular citizen action of the Mahoning Valley coalition and the flames of burning buildings in the Los Angeles riot, there is no contest. The media may offer occasional models of collective action that make a difference, but they are highly selective ones.

### Identity

Being a collective agent implies being part of a "we" who can do something. The identity component of collective action frames is about the process of defining this "we," typically in opposition to some "they" who have different interests or values. As Melucci (1989) suggests, social movements elaborate and negotiate this meaning over time, and some even make the question of "who we are" an important part of their internal discourse.

Here it is the media framing of the movement, not the issue, that is relevant. Media images of a movement, as Gitlin (1980: 3) argues, "become implicated in a movement's self-image," and frequently the quality of the media images do not present the movement's intended identity. Since there are many aspects to a collective identity, it is quite possible for media coverage to

reinforce one part that a movement wishes to encourage at the same time that it contradicts or undercuts other parts.

It is useful to think of collective identities as three embedded layers: *organizational*, *movement*, and *solidary group*. The organizational layer refers to identities built around movement carriers—the union maid or the party loyalist, for example. This layer may or may not be embedded in a movement layer that is broader than any particular organization. The identity of peace activists, for example, rarely rests on one organization; people support different efforts at different moments while subordinating all organizations to their broader movement identity.

Finally, the movement layer may or may not be embedded in a larger solidary group identity constructed around people's social location—for example, as workers or as black women. That constituents may come from a common social location does not itself mean that this will be relevant for movement or organizational identities. Environmental activists, for example, may be largely white and professional-managerial class, but they are likely to decry the narrowness of their base. Their internal discourse often focuses on how they can activate more workers and people of color.

Sometimes these different layers are so closely integrated that they become a single amalgam: a movement arises out of a particular solidary group with widespread support from it, and one particular organization comes to embody the movement. Often, however, the different layers are separate. Many working-class Americans, for example, personally identify with "working people," but have no identification with their union and think of the "labor movement" as something that happened fifty years ago.

Note that the locus of collective identity—for all three layers—is at the sociocultural, not the individual, level. It is manifested through the language and symbols by which it is publicly expressed—in styles of dress, language, demeanor, and discourse. One learns about its content by asking people about the meaning of labels and other cultural symbols, not about their own personal identity.

All social movements have the task of bridging individual and sociocultural levels. This is accomplished by enlarging the personal identities of constituents to include the relevant collective identities as part of their definition of self. The most powerful and enduring collective identities link solidary, movement, and organizational layers in the participants' sense of self. The movement layer is especially critical because it is a necessary catalyst in fusing solidary and organizational identification in an integrated movement identity.

Some movements attempt to mobilize their constituents with an all-inclusive "we." "We" are the world, humankind, or, in the case of domestic issues, all good citizens. Such an *aggregate* frame turns the "we" into a pool of individuals rather than a potential collective actor. The call for action in such frames is personal—for example, to make peace, hunger, or the environment your personal responsibility.

There is no clear "they" in aggregate frames. The targets are not actors but abstractions—hunger, pollution, war, poverty, disease. These abstractions do not point to an external target whose actions or policies must be changed. If pollution is the problem and we are all polluters, then "we" are the target of action. "We" are the "they" in such frames, and neither agent nor target is a collective actor.

Collective action frames, in contrast, are adversarial; "we" stand in opposition or conflict to some "they." "They" are responsible for some objectionable situation and have the power to change it by acting differently in some fashion. We and they are differentiated rather than conflated.

Aggregate frames are central to what Lofland (1989) and McCarthy and Wolfson (1992) call "consensus movements." The latter define them as "organized movements for change that find *widespread support* for their goals and *little or no organized opposition* from the population of a geographic community." The movement against drunk driving provides an example. But widespread support for the broadest goals of a movement does not tell us much about whether there will be organized opposition. This depends on how a group translates its goals into action imperatives. Within the same movement, different social movement organizations will vary in how they frame the issue and in the form and targets of their action. The peace and environmental movements provide examples of a range of more consensual and more adversarial groups. It seems more useful to speak of consensus *frames* or consensus *strategies* rather than to treat this as a property of movements.

A blurry "they," by itself, does not imply an aggregate frame. It is quite possible to have a clear and collective "we" while the "they" remains vague because it is so elusive. This is especially likely to be true when the main targets of change are cultural more than political and economic. If one is attacking, for example, the dominant cultural code of what is normal, the decisions of governments and powerful corporate actors may be secondary. In the pursuit of cultural change, the target is often diffused through the whole civil society and the "they" being pursued is structurally elusive.

In such a situation, the mass media are likely to become the ambivalent target of action. To the extent that they reflect the cultural code that the

group is challenging, they are necessarily an adversary. But since they also are capable of amplifying the challenge and expanding its audience, helping it to reach the many settings in which cultural codes operate, they are necessarily a potential ally as well. Hence the characteristic ambivalence with which so many movement organizations approach the mass media as both a means for changing society and a target that epitomizes the objectionable cultural practices being challenged.

In sum, frames with a clear "we" and an elusive "they" are quite capable of being fully collective and adversarial; unlike aggregate frames, agent and target of action are not conflated. These frames, then, are simply a more complicated type of adversarial frame.

In one respect, media discourse works to encourage adversarial frames. Collective action by movement organizations helps to define an issue as controversial, triggering the balance norm of presenting quotes from two conflicting sides. The process, with its simultaneous advantages and disadvantages from the standpoint of movements, is well illustrated by media coverage of the 1977 site occupation of the Seabrook, New Hampshire, nuclear reactor by the Clamshell Alliance.

The television story is about a dyadic conflict between Governor Meldrim Thomson and his allies and the Clamshell Alliance over whether the Seabrook reactor will be completed. The central question addressed is who will win and, hence, there is very little direct commentary about nuclear power as such. But the coverage does present images of the anti-nuclear-power movement as it implicitly addresses the question, What kind of people are against nuclear power?

For a deaf television viewer, the answer would seem to be people who wear backpacks and play Frisbee. All three networks feature these images in more than one segment. One sees beards and long hair, bandanas, "no nuke" buttons, people playing guitars and doing needlepoint. Outside the courthouse, after the demonstrators have been released, we see happy family reunions, with many children.

These visual images do not have a fixed meaning. One who believes that the experts know best may see frivolous flower children and environmental extremists who look as if they will not be happy until they turn the White House into a bird sanctuary. A more sympathetic viewer may see loving, caring, earthy young people who are socially integrated and concerned about our shared environment.

There are network differences in the words accompanying these images. The CBS and NBC coverage leaves the interpretive work to the viewer, but

ABC offers its own interpretation. We are told that these are the same kind of people who were involved in antiwar demonstrations, "demonstrators in search of a cause." The network allows two members of the Clam to speak for themselves, quoting their determination to win ("We have to stop it at any cost") while omitting any quotations dealing with their reasons for acting.

The demonstrators are presented relatively sympathetically in news-magazine coverage. Both *Time* and *Newsweek* mention their commitment to nonviolence, and *Newsweek* adds their exclusion of drugs, weapons, and fighting. The accompanying photographs reinforce the television images of backpackers; *Newsweek* calls them scruffy and mentions Frisbees, guitars, and reading Thoreau. *Time* also quotes the publisher of the *Manchester Union Leader*, William Loeb, who likened the Clam to "Nazi storm troopers under Hitler," but characterizes him in a discrediting way as an "abrasive conservative."

Some media frames invite the viewer to see the antinuclear movement in adversarial class terms. Opponents of nuclear power are presented as indulged children of the affluent who have everything they need. They have secure professional jobs in hand or awaiting them and can afford to ignore the imperatives of economic growth. These "coercive utopians" (McCracken 1977, 1979) are intent on imposing their antigrowth vision on others at the expense of the real interests of working people.

The adversarial frames offered by media discourse on nuclear power do not emphasize a collective movement identity that the movement would like to embrace. The movement's preferred identity cuts across racial and class lines. To the extent that it offers an adversarial frame at all, it is the people versus the nuclear industry and its allies in government. But when this adversarial frame appears in the media, it is in highly attenuated form, and it is often undercut by imagery that emphasizes the narrowness of the solidary group identities engaged by the movement.

On the issues discussed in Gamson (1992), media discourse is heavily adversarial only on affirmative action. Troubled industry and Arab-Israeli conflict are almost never framed as adversarial across solidary group cleavages in American society. And even on affirmative action, the adversarial framing is continually undercut by a discourse that assumes persons have rights as individuals. Although the term "equal rights," for example, could apply to the claims of a group as well, the discourse makes the articulation of collective claims problematic. The assertion of injustices based on social inequalities must contend with a culturally normative response that asserts that we are all

individuals and implicitly denies the relevance of social location and group differences.

In spite of the tendency of media discourse to emphasize a fight, it narrows the basis of conflict, divorcing the movement level from the solidary group level. This works against the efforts of movements to integrate the different parts of a collective identity.

## Conclusion

Qualifications and nuances notwithstanding, the overall role of media discourse is clear: it often obstructs and only rarely and unevenly contributes to the development of collective action frames. The good news for movement activists is that media discourse is only one resource. Selectively integrated with other resources—especially experiential knowledge—it remains a central component in the construction of collective action frames.

Using an integrated resource strategy is far from a sufficient condition for developing this political consciousness, but it helps. It is especially important in constructing the injustice component. Experiential knowledge helps to connect the abstract cognition of unfairness with the emotion of moral indignation. Media discourse is equally important in forging an injustice frame. Experiential knowledge of injustice in concrete form stimulates the emotions, but they may dissipate for lack of a clear target. Media discourse places the experienced injustice in context, making it a special case of a broader injustice. The experiential resource concretizes injustice; the media resource generalizes it and makes it shared and collective.

Relevant experiences, be they direct, vicarious, or the generalized sort embodied in popular wisdom, are not enough. They may be sufficient to guide people to some coherent frame on an issue but, if people are to become agents who influence the conditions that govern their daily lives, they must connect their understanding with a broader public discourse as well. Without an integrated understanding, relevant events and actors in the news will remain a sideshow—and a frequently bewildering one, having little to do with their daily lives.

The problem of linkage varies from issue to issue. Meaning on some issues is overly dependent on media discourse. The difficulty people face here is connecting their media-based understanding of the issue with their everyday lives. Understanding remains abstract and emotionally distant without the elements of collective identification and moral indignation that flow from experience. Integration does not happen spontaneously unless special

conditions produce it—as they can, for example, when events in the news directly disrupt or threaten to disrupt their daily lives. More typically, the relevance is indirect and some cognitive leap is necessary to bridge the gap.

The organizer's task is more difficult on such issues. Abstract argument about complex indirect and future effects will not forge the emotional linkage even if people are convinced intellectually. Two alternative strategies seem more promising than presenting arguments about general causes and effects.

The first is to search for existing experiential knowledge that can be shown to be relevant for a broader collective action frame. It helps here if organizers share the life world of those who are being encouraged to make the linkage. Then they can draw on their own experience in pointing out connections with some confidence that others will have similar stories of their own. Some relevant experiences are universal enough to transcend a broad range of social backgrounds.

The second is to create situations where people can gain experiential knowledge of injustice. Public discourse facilitates knowledge through vicarious experience when it personalizes broader injustices by using exemplary cases to embody them. Hence, the concrete experience of Anne Frank conveys the meaning of the Holocaust in an experiential mode that no amount of factual information on the 6 million Jewish victims of Nazi death camps can convey. Social movement organizations frequently try to make the link by bringing potential participants in contact with witnesses whose firsthand accounts provide listeners with vicarious experiential knowledge.

There is a well-laid cultural trap into which movement activists sometimes fall. They frame their primary task as marketing a product for consumers through the mass media. The product is a cause in which they sincerely believe but that, for a variety of reasons, they must "sell" to others. The constituency for this mobilization effort is thought of as a set of potential buyers whose response of vote, donation, signature, or other token marks a successful sales effort. The logic of this approach leads one to look for a more effective marketing strategy, expressed through catchy symbols that will tap an emotional hot button and trigger the desired response.

Emotion is an important component of collective action frames, as I have emphasized. Perhaps it is quite possible to trigger a burst of moral indignation by finding the right photograph or clever slogan. The problem with the hot-button approach is not that it does not work, but that it directly undermines the goal of increasing people's sense of agency.

Collective agency can hardly be encouraged by treating potential participants as passive objects to be manipulated. This simply decreases any tenden-

cy toward the development of a collective identity and sympathy with some sustained effort at social change. It provides good reason to extend the pervasive cynicism about those who run the society to include those who supposedly challenge their domination.

To increase a sense of agency, symbolic strategies should attempt to draw out the latent sense of agency that people already carry around with them. Organizers need to assume that a sense of agency is, at least, dormant and capable of being awakened. Their task is to listen for it and to nurture it where it occurs spontaneously. One does not transform people who feel individually powerless into a group with a sense of collective agency by pushing hot buttons. Direct, rather than mass-mediated, relationships are necessary.

### Notes

I wish to thank Mary Katzenstein and the editors of this volume for their helpful comments on an earlier draft.

1. They also define collective action frames as "emergent," but this seems an unwise inclusion. Changes in political consciousness can occur at various points, sometimes well in advance of mobilization. They may have already emerged by the time mobilization occurs, awaiting only some change in political opportunity to precipitate action. In other cases, they may emerge gradually, developing most fully after some initial collective action. Emergence should not be made a matter of definition.

## Chapter 6

### What's in a Name? Nationalist Movements and Public Discourse

*Jane Jenson*

A notable theme of public discourse in Canada is the naming of nations. Denominating nations involves much more than the ethnic labeling familiar in polyethnic states like the United States, where Italian-Americans, Asian-Americans, and so on seek political recognition.<sup>1</sup> As in other multinational states, much of Canadian politics in the past three decades has involved competing assertions of nationhood, some of which reject the very label "Canadian."

As Benedict Anderson tells us, nations are "imagined communities" that claim sovereignty and recognize a limited number of people as members (1991: 6-7). They identify an "us," which can be distinguished from the "other." This discourse has meaning only to the extent that it is shared by members of the community, thereby constituting a collective identity. Therefore, nationalist movements are like other social movements; their politics includes the construction of a collective identity.

Since nations are the result of political action, there are a variety of ways, or styles, in which they can be imagined.<sup>2</sup> The identification of any nation can vary, depending upon the strategic choices made by the movement in light of the ends it seeks, the institutional constraints it faces, and the identity claims, national or not, made by others in the same community or state. National identities are no more "embodied" than are the collective identities of other social movements.<sup>3</sup>

One goal of nationalist movements, like other social movements, is to resist "outside naming" and to be "self-naming" (Chartrand 1991: 2). Therefore, movements struggle over names and seek recognition of the one they prefer, both within and outside the community. In competing for discursive space, communities are imagining more than their present and future; they also imagine their pasts. Therefore, social movements making national claims, like