POOR PEOPLE'S MOVEMENTS
Why They Succeed, How They Fail

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In the reviews that appeared during the interval between the publication of the hardcover and the paperback editions of Poor People’s Movements, a number of critics took issue with some of the conclusions we reached. In this brief introduction to the paperback edition, we take the opportunity of continuing the debate.¹

Perhaps the singular contribution of the intellectual tradition of the left, as it has developed since the nineteenth century, has been to bring working-class people fully into history, not simply as victims but as actors. The left has understood that working-class people are a historical force and could become a greater historical force. And the left has understood that the distinctive form in which that force expresses itself is the mass movement.

In theory, the left has also understood that working-class movements are not forged merely by willing or thinking or arguing them into existence. Proletarian movements, Marx said, are formed by a dialectical process reflecting the institutional logic of capitalist arrangements. The proletariat is a creature, not of communist intellectuals, but of capital and the conditions of capitalist production, a point emphasized in the Communist Manifesto:

In proportion as the bourgeoisie, i.e., capital, is developed, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working class, developed...[and]...not only increases in number; its strength grows, and it feels that strength more... Of all the classes that stand face to

face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class. The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of Modern Industry; the proletariat is its special and essential product.

Of course, historical developments frustrated Marx's prediction: expanding capitalist production did not create a revolutionary proletariat.

Still, the basic mode of dialectical analysis underlying the failed prediction—the idea that the struggles of ordinary people are both formed by and directed against institutional arrangements—is correct. The prediction failed because Marx did not anticipate the specific institutional patterns which evolved under modern capitalism; nor did he anticipate the particular forms of struggle which would be generated in reaction to them. These institutional arrangements inhibited the emergence of a unified and revolutionary working class: the spread of imperialism helped to produce the surpluses that would raise working-class material standards in the mother countries; the balkanization of modern industry helped to fractionalize the working class; new institutions such as public education helped to ensure capitalist ideological hegemony. In turn, these institutional arrangements shaped the character of working-class resistance. Contemporary working-class struggles are fragmented where the left wishes for unity, and working-class demands are reformist where the left prescribes a radical agenda.

But the intellectual left has failed to confront these developments fully, at least in its posture toward movements in industrial societies. It has failed to understand that the main features of contemporary popular struggles are both a reflection of an institutionally determined logic and a challenge to that logic. It has clung instead to the specific nineteenth-century content of the dialectic, and by doing so, has forfeited dialectical analysis. Insofar as contemporary movements in industrial societies do not take the forms predicted by an analysis of nineteenth-century capitalism, the left has not tried to understand these movements, but rather has tended simply to disapprove of them. The wrong people have mobilized, for they are not truly the industrial proletariat. Or they have mobilized around the wrong organizational and political strategies. The movements of the people disappoint the doctrine, and so the movements are dismissed.

In writing this book, we tried to set aside doctrines in order to examine some of the ways in which the specific features of American social structure have shaped working-class movements. We were concerned to identify the institutional conditions which sometimes make mass movements possible, the institutional conditions which determine the forms taken by mass movements, and the institutional conditions which determine the responses of elites. We were led to these concerns by what we thought were the inadequacies of existing ways of thinking about movements. Obviously, protest movements are discredited in the dominant pluralistic tradition on the ground that there is ample opportunity for the working class to pursue its interests through democratic institutional channels. More to our point, many on the left also discredit these movements because they fail to conform to doctrinal prescriptions regarding constituencies, strategies, and demands. But this sort of complaint typically ignores the historically specific circumstances in which social movements emerge and in which constituencies, strategies, and demands are formed.

We are prompted to make these opening comments because so much of the early response to this book has been dominated by a reiteration, of doctrinal injunctions. In effect, a number of critics undertook to review the movements we study, rather than our analyses, and they are displeased. The movements fell short of the doctrine (and so, therefore, do we, for we are frankly sympathetic with struggles that were, in one respect or another, disappointing to the critics). Some critics were dissatisfied, for example, with the various expressions of the post–World War II black movement: with the civil rights struggle in the South, or the riots in the North, or the surging demand for public welfare benefits that produced a welfare explosion in the 1960s. The black movement is blamed for worsening divisions in the working class, for producing a popular backlash, and for failing to win larger gains, such as full employment (or even a new social order).

But popular insurgency does not proceed by someone else's rules or hopes; it has its own logic and direction. It flows from historically specific circumstances: it is a reaction against those circumstances, and it is also limited by those circumstances. One of the crucial ways in which the black movement was institutionally structured, and thus limited, was by the existence of deep racial cleavages in the American working class. One might wish it were otherwise; if ever there were
sectors of the working class that *should* have been "the closest of allies," as one critic complained, it was the black and white poor. But the institutional development of the United States had determined otherwise, as witness the history of failed efforts to produce multicultural, class-based protest movements. And so, when massive socioeconomic and political changes finally made an independent black struggle possible, black eruptions provoked the violent opposition of southern white working-class people and later the opposition of northern working-class people as well. No course of action available to blacks could have prevented the worsening of antagonisms so deeply embedded in the experience of the white working class. If blacks were to mobilize at all in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, working-class divisions would inevitably be widened. What, then, is the point of Jack Beatty's insistence that "strategies which divide [the working class] are... dangerous"? To suggest that blacks might have done it differently—that they might have induced large elements of the southern and northern white working class to coalesce with them—without showing how specific institutional conditions afforded that option, is to assume that people are free to act without regard to the constraints imposed by their social context.

Moreover, the rigid application of these doctrinal prescriptions may tend to obscure recognition of the longer-term implications of mass insurgency. The black movement, however, may have improved the possibilities for more broad-based working-class struggles in the future. As a result of the new legal accommodations forced by the movement, at least some aspects of the institutional framework supporting racism have been weakened, and that is hardly a guarantor of future class-based movements, it is at least one institutional prerequisite. In other words, the doctrinal rejection of any strategy that engenders tensions within the working class ignored both the institutional forces that produce those divisions in the first place and the conflictual processes by which they may, perhaps, be overcome.

Another criticism leveled at the movements we analyzed is that they produced a broad-based "backlash" in the American electorate. Harrington says that disruptive protest in the 1960s produced "the mean spirit exploited by people like Richard Nixon," and Bernstein warns that disruptive protest is "dangerous." There is a large measure of unreality about this criticism. It is as if group or class struggles can, when carefully managed, proceed without engendering conflict. Obviously the labor struggles of the mid-thirties helped produce the corporate-led backlash that began in 1938 and culminated in the "witch-hunts" of the late forties and early fifties; and just as obviously the black struggles of the fifties and sixties helped produce the backlash of the seventies (to which the student and antinuclear movements also contributed). But how could it have been otherwise? Important interests were at stake, and had those interests not been a profound source of contention, there would have been no need for labor insurgency in the one period nor black insurgency in the other. Put another way, the relevant question to ask is whether, on balance, the movement made gains or lost ground; whether it advanced the interests of working people or set back those interests.

A number of our critics, however, dismiss the gains of these movements because they were insufficient. The more realistic question whether the gains made were intrinsically important, and thus worth winning, is not addressed. Nor do the critics say why more was possible, how larger gains might have been made. Thus Starr refers to "the dozens of 'mass mobilizations' and ghetto riots of the 1960s that left so light a trace on the body politic"; Harrington suggests that full employment should have been the priority for the welfare rights movement; Brightman faults the insurgency of the period for failing to move us toward "a new social order"; and Hobsbawm says of what was won in the sixties that "it is not negligible, but it is not what we wanted."

Our view is different. What was won must be judged by what was possible. From this perspective, the victories were considerable. For blacks in the South, political rights were achieved, and that meant, at the deepest level, a substantial reduction in the use of terror in the social control of blacks (see Chapter 4). At the bottom of the black community, the poor acted against the relief system, and by doing so they ensured their survival in a society which plainly would continue to deny them alternative means of supporting themselves (see Chapter 5). Nor did the participants in the relief movement of the 1960s prefer welfare; together with Harrington, they plainly preferred decent jobs at decent wages. But they understood the political facts of their lives rather more clearly than Harrington: the unemployed poor

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3 R. C. Cobb's comment on the peasantry in Napoleonic France seems appropriate here: "[Analyst], few of whom have ever experienced hunger, have no business blaming poor people for accepting, even gratefully, the products of bourgeois charity. And it would be indecent to upbraid the affection of the past for allowing themselves to be brought out of what historians have decreed were 'forward looking' movements by the grant of relief." The Police and the People (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 320.
in this period lacked the power to force programs of full employment. What difference would it have made, then, had they proclaimed full employment their central goal? One is reminded here of the struggles of the unemployed in the Great Depression; the Workers’ Alliance of America called both for full employment and for the abolition of the profit system. But these large goals aside, the fact is that the Workers’ Alliance of America could not even manage to keep relief benefits flowing to the unemployed (see Chapter 2). In other words, to criticize a movement for not advocating or reaching this goal or that one without even the most casual appraisal of its political resources is an exercise in self-righteousness.

Perhaps, as Barrington Moore suggests in a recent book, there are “suppressed historical alternatives”—political options that were institutionally available but that were not exercised by a movement’s leadership. But it is the merit of Moore’s approach that he does not treat this matter in doctrinal terms, abstracting movements and the options of their leadership from a given historical context with all of its contradictory limitations and constraints. He analyzes the case of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) in the years following World War I. To avert a Communist takeover, the SPD claimed that it was compelled to coalesce with the military and industrial elites, a decision that subsequently helped bring the Nazis to power. Moore asks whether an alternative to the totalitarianism of left or right was possible, such as some form of democratic socialism, and concludes that it was. He argues, for example, that the vulnerability of the SPD stemmed in part from its failure to take control of the policing function, an action that was clearly within its grasp, with the result that it became dependent on the German military for the maintenance of order. In other words, he tries to show what the suppressed alternatives were, and to show that these were grounded in empirically demonstrable institutional conditions. It is just such careful analysis of actual political possibilities and limitations that the critics of the gains won in the 1930s and 1960s fail to make. To be sure, what was won was not enough—neither the gains of the one period nor those of the other. It is not what we wanted. But it is far from being negligible. And over all, it is what seemed possible.

All of this is to say that tenets about the strategies that movements “should” have followed or “ought” to have avoided, statements regarding the goals that movements “should” have embraced or “ought” to have eschewed, and statements regarding the reactions from dominant groups or others that “ought” to have been averted—none of these criticisms takes on meaning unless it can also be shown that it could have been done differently. And to show how it might have been done goes beyond the invocation of doctrine; it requires examination of the institutional conditions which both create and limit the opportunities for mass struggle. It is to such an examination that we hoped to contribute with this book.

If features of social context influence the course of movements, so too do the organizational forms that are developed within movements. Here, however, organizers and leaders exercise some measure of discretion; they play a role in setting the directions of internal organizational development. And it is our criticism of the way such discretion has typically been employed that has caused the severest upset among reviewers. The upset was, perhaps, not surprising, for our critique of organizational efforts offended central tenets of left doctrine.

In the main the left has held that formal mass-membership organizations are the correct vehicles by which the working class can drive toward power, at least in nonrevolutionary situations. This view is so deeply imprinted on the tradition of the left that debates about political strategy have been virtually confined to the question how to build such bureaucratically structured membership organizations. The strategic usefulness of this organizational form, its effectiveness as a vehicle for influence, has been treated as axiomatic.

In three of the four movements we analyze, organizers and leaders created mass-membership organizations (by contrast, leaders in the southern civil rights movement emphasized coordinated mass mobilizations); experience with these membership organizations provides a historical basis for examining their usefulness. We draw several conclusions from this historical experience. First, it was not formal organizations but mass defiance that won what was won in the 1930s and 1960s: industrial workers, for example, forced concessions from industry and government as a result of the disruptive effects of large-scale strikes; defiant blacks forced concessions as a result of the disruptive effects of mass civil disobedience. Second, because they were acutely vulnerable to internal oligarchy and stasis and to external integration with elites, the bureaucratic organizations that were developed within these movements tended to blunt the militancy that was the fundamental source of such influence as the movements
exerted. And finally, for the most part, the formal organizations collapsed as the movements subsided. This is an important point, since critics of movements complain of their short life, as if formal organizations provided a more enduring alternative form for working-class mobilization. To be sure, the unions that emerged in the 1930s did become permanent; and as we say in Chapter 3, they have been useful in protecting the interests of workers. Still, the unions are obviously no exception to the oligarchical and integrative tendencies exhibited by formal membership organizations. In any case, it was the unique advantages afforded by their location in the mass-production industries that made the sustained organization of workers possible, and these situational advantages are not available to most other working-class and lower-class groups.

Now all of this may be unsettling, but it is not startling. Our conclusions are very similar to those reached by Robert Michels decades ago on the basis of his analysis of the organizational imperatives that accounted for the conservative tendencies of the German Social Democracy. The intellectual left has dealt with Michels largely by ignoring him. But the dilemmas to which he pointed persist. Our critics are dealing with our analysis in a similar way, dismissing it by fiat. “A good book with a bad point,” Starr says, and he goes on to characterize us as guilty of the “adoration of spontaneity.” Our critique of the mass-membership bureaucracy is thus treated as if we eschewed any form of coherent and coordinated mass action. Another reviewer says “we must try harder,” as if organizational imperatives can simply be willed away. Bernstein argues that the dilemmas to which we point “lie not in the fact of organization but in the nature of its leadership” (his emphasis); but it is our point that the imperatives of mass-membership organizational maintenance characteristically create the kind of leadership Bernstein deplores. Hobsbawm acknowledges the main points of our analysis, suggesting that they constitute “a powerful contribution to the cause of realism,” only to conclude that “the argument is unsatisfactory” because the poor “need, more than ever, not only a strategy of effective pressure but policies—and bodies capable of carrying out policies.”

The poor need a great deal, but they are not likely to be helped to get it when we ignore the weaknesses in received doctrines revealed by historical experience. If we acknowledge those weaknesses, we may do better. We may then begin to consider alternative forms of organizations through which working-class people can act together in defiance of their rulers in ways that are more congruent with the structure of working-class life and with the process of working-class struggle, and less susceptible to penetration by dominant elites. The mass-membership bureaucracy was, after all, not invented by the left, but is rather a form through which the left emulated the modes of organization that exist in the capitalist society the left seeks to transform. That it should be defended so uncritically seems odd.

F.F.P.

July 1978

R.A.C.
Introduction

This book is about several protest movements that erupted among lower-class groups in the United States during the middle years of the twentieth century. We first examine the protests that arose during the years of the Great Depression, both among the unemployed and among industrial workers. Then we turn to the black protests that arose after World War II, starting in the South and spreading to the northern cities.

It is not our purpose, however, to present a comprehensive historical account of these events. We have tried to rely whenever we could on the historical research done by others. Our purpose is rather to probe for the political meaning of the extraordinary struggles which occurred during these two tumultuous periods in recent American history. We have tried to understand the features of the American political economy which explain why these eruptions occurred when they did, why the eruptions took the forms they did, and why elites responded to them as they did. And we have tried to understand these events because we think they reveal much about both the limitations and the possibilities for power by the poor in the electoral-representative political institutions of the United States.

There is, of course, a considerable literature on protest movements. It is our opinion, however, that the most important question to be asked about protest movements is not dealt with in this literature. As forms of political struggle, protest movements sometimes succeed and sometimes fail. Sometimes they force concessions from the state that help to relieve the condition of life of the lower classes.

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1 The chapters on the movement of industrial workers and the civil rights movement are based on secondary sources because a great deal of historical work has been done on these movements. Less has been done on the movement of the unemployed in the Great Depression, and in that chapter we rely on both secondary and primary sources. The chapter on the welfare rights movement is based on our direct knowledge of and involvement in this movement, supplemented by the relatively few studies that have been done.
and sometimes they are ignored or repressed. Once protest is acknowledged as a form of political struggle the chief question to be examined must inevitably be the relationship between what the protesters do, the context in which they do it, and the varying responses of the state. It is this kind of analysis of past protest movements that hardly exists. As a consequence lower-class groups, and those who align themselves with lower-class groups, have been denied the political wisdom that historical analysis of their own struggles might provide.

One result of this denial of history is the persistence of certain doctrines among the activists and agitators who, from time to time in the twentieth-century United States, have tried to mobilize the lower classes for political action. Some of these activists, like the cadres of the civil rights movement, were simply brave reformers, committed not to the total transformation of American society but to reforms consistent with American doctrines. Others, like many of the organizers in the depression movements, were socialists of one kind or another who saw particular protests as only a first step in a longer-term revolutionary struggle.

But whatever their overarching ideology, activists have usually concentrated their efforts on developing formally structured organizations with a mass membership drawn from the lower classes. What underlies such efforts is the conviction that formal organization is a vehicle of power. This conviction is based on several assumptions. First, formal organization presumably makes possible the coordination of the economic and political resources of large numbers of people who separately have few such resources. Second, formal organization presumably permits the intelligent and strategic use of these resources in political conflict. And third, formal organization presumably ensures the continuity of lower-class political mobilization over time. This, in brief, is the model of mass-based, permanent organization which has dominated efforts to build political power among the lower classes.

Since the essence of this model of political action is that formal organization will ensure regular, disciplined, and continuing contributions and participation from its members, the model depends for its success on the ability of organizations to secure incentives or sanctions that will command and sustain the required contributions and participation from masses of people. The presumption of most reformers and revolutionaries who have tried to organize the lower classes is that once the economic and political resources of at least modest numbers of people are combined in disciplined action, public or private elites will be forced to yield up the concessions necessary to sustain and enlarge mass affiliation.

The model has not succeeded in practice, as the studies in this book reveal. The model has not succeeded because it contains a grave flaw. The flaw is, quite simply, that it is not possible to compel concessions from elites that can be used as resources to sustain oppositional organizations over time.

In part, activists do not recognize the flaw inherent in the mass-based permanent organization model because they are attracted to the possibility of organizing the lower classes at extraordinary times, at moments when large numbers of lower-class people are roused to indignation and defiance and thus when a great deal seems possible. Organizers do not create such moments, as we will be at some pains to explain later, but they are excited by them, and the signs of the moment conspire to support the organizer’s faith. One such sign is the sheer excess of political energy among the masses, which itself breathes life into the belief that large organizations can be developed and sustained. Another is that, in the face of the threat of popular insurgency, elites may offer up concessions that would otherwise have seemed improbable; the victories needed to sustain organization thus seem ready to be won. Most important of all in affirming the viability of the model, elites are likely at times of mass disturbance to seek out whatever organizations have emerged among the insurgents, soliciting their views and encouraging them to air grievances before formal bodies of the state. While these symbolic gestures give the appearance of influence to formal organizations composed of lower-class people, elites are not actually responding to the organizations; they are responding to the underlying force of insurgency. But insurgency is always short-lived. Once it subsides and the people leave the streets, most of the organizations which it temporarily threw up and which elites helped to nurture simply fade away. As for the few organizations which survive, it is because they become more useful to those who control the resources on which they depend than to the lower-class groups which the organizations claim to represent. Organizations endure, in short, by abandoning their oppositional politics.

Our main point, however, is not simply that efforts to build organizations are futile. The more important point is that endeavoring to do what they cannot do, organizers fail to do what they can do. During those brief periods in which people are roused to indignation, when they are prepared to defy the authorities to whom
they ordinarily defer, during those brief moments when lower-class groups exert some force against the state, those who call themselves leaders do not usually escalate the momentum of the people's protests. They do not because they are preoccupied with trying to build and sustain embryonic formal organizations in the sure conviction that these organizations will enlarge and become powerful. Thus the studies that follow show that, all too often, when workers erupted in strikes, organizers collected dues cards; when tenants refused to pay rent and stood off marshals, organizers formed building committees; when people were burning and looting, organizers used that "moment of madness" to draft constitutions.

The study of past movements reveals another point of equal importance. Organizers not only failed to seize the opportunity presented by the rise of unrest, they typically acted in ways that blunted or curbed the disruptive force which lower-class people were sometimes able to mobilize. In small part, this resulted from the doctrinal commitment to the development of mass-based, permanent organization, for organization-building activities tended to draw people away from the streets and into the meeting rooms. In part it resulted from the preoccupation with internal leadership prerogatives that organization-building seems to induce. But in the largest part organizers tended to work against disruption because, in their search for resources to maintain their organizations, they were driven inexorably to elites, and to the tangible and symbolic supports that elites could provide. Elites conferred these resources because they understood that it was organization-building, not disruption, that organizers were about.

Ordinarily, of course, elites do not support efforts to form organizations of lower-class people. But when insurgency wells up, apparently uncontrollable, elites respond. And one of their responses is to cultivate those lower-class organizations which begin to emerge in such periods, for they have little to fear from organizations, especially from organizations which come to depend upon them for support. Thus, however unwittingly, leaders and organizers of the lower classes act in the end to facilitate the efforts of elites to channel the insurgent masses into normal politics, believing all the while that they are taking the long and arduous but certain path to power. When the tumult is over, these organizations usually fade, no longer useful to those who provided the resources necessary to their survival. Or the organization persists by becoming increasingly subservient to those on whom it depends.

Either way, no lesson seems to be learned. Each generation of leaders and organizers acts as if there were no political moral to be derived from the history of failed organizing efforts, nor from the obvious fact that whatever the people won was a response to their turbulence and not to their organized numbers. Consequently, when new institutional dislocations once again set people free from prevailing systems of social control, with the result that protest erupts for another moment in time, leaders and organizers attempt again to do what they cannot do, and forfeit the chance to do what they might do.

We wrote this book as a step toward culling the historical wisdom that might inform lower-class political mobilizations in the future. The first chapter is a theoretical overview of the societal forces which structure protest movements of the lower classes in the United States. We consider this overview essential, for the forces which structure mass insurgency also define the boundaries within which organizers and leaders act, however much they might suppose otherwise. It is our belief that many past organizing efforts foundered because they failed to take account of the profound ways in which the social structure restricts the forms of political action in which the lower classes can engage, and having failed to recognize these limitations, organizers and leaders also failed to exploit the opportunities afforded by lower-class mobilizations when they did occur.

Then we turn to the movements of the Great Depression and of the post–World War II period. Our studies of insurgency during the years of the Great Depression include the movement of the unemployed that gave rise to the Workers' Alliance of America and the movement of industrial workers that produced the Congress of Industrial Organizations. The postwar studies include the southern civil rights movement and the protest organizations it spawned, and the movement of welfare recipients that generated the National Welfare Rights Organization. The industrial workers' movement and the civil rights movement gained more than the others; it is our central concern to show how differences in the strategies of organizers and leaders help to explain variations in what was won.

Before we go on to the body of our argument we ought to explain our use of the words "lower class" or "poor." We do not use the terms in the contemporary sociological sense of a stratum beneath the working class, but rather as a stratum within the working class that is poor by standards prevailing in society at the time. Although the specific social origins of the participants in the movements
examine here varied greatly—some were white men, some were black women; some were displaced southern agricultural workers, some were urban immigrant industrial workers—we consider that all of the protest movements we analyze arose among sectors of the working class, including the protest of welfare mothers in the 1960s. Our usage deviates from sociological custom but it is consistent with classical Marxist definitions of the working class. Our usage also deviates from the current fashion on the left of referring to impoverished and underemployed working-class groups as “lumpen proletariat,” a fashion we find not only offensive for its denigrating implications but also an abuse of Marx, who meant the term to refer to deviant and criminal elements from all classes.

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F.F.P.
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CHAPTER 1
The Structuring of Protest

Common sense and historical experience combine to suggest a simple but compelling view of the roots of power in any society. Crudely but clearly stated, those who control the means of physical coercion, and those who control the means of producing wealth, have power over those who do not. This much is true whether the means of coercion consists in the primitive force of a warrior caste or the technological force of a modern army. And it is true whether the control of production consists in control by priests of the mysteries of the calendar on which agriculture depends, or control by financiers of the large-scale capital on which industrial production depends. Since coercive force can be used to gain control of the means of producing wealth, and since control of wealth can be used to gain coercive force, these two sources of power tend over time to be drawn together within one ruling class.

Common sense and historical experience also combine to suggest that these sources of power are protected and enlarged by the use of that power not only to control the actions of men and women, but also to control their beliefs. What some call superstructure, and what others call culture, includes an elaborate system of beliefs and ritual behaviors which defines for people what is right and what is wrong and why; what is possible and what is impossible; and the behavioral imperatives that follow from these beliefs. Because this superstructure of beliefs and rituals is evolved in the context of unequal power, it is inevitable that beliefs and rituals reinforce inequality, by rendering the powerful divine and the challengers evil. Thus the class struggles that might otherwise be inevitable in
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sharply unequal societies ordinarily do not seem either possible or right from the perspective of those who live within the structure of belief and ritual fashioned by those societies. People whose only possible recourse in struggle is to defy the beliefs and rituals laid down by their rulers ordinarily do not.

What common sense and historical experience suggest has been true of many societies is no less true of modern capitalist societies, the United States among them. Power is rooted in the control of coercive force and in the control of the means of production. However, in capitalist societies this reality is not legitimated by rendering the powerful divine, but by obscuring their existence. Thus electoral-representative arrangements proclaim the franchise, not force and wealth, as the basis for the accumulation and use of power. Wealth is, to be sure, unequally distributed, but the franchise is widely and nearly equally distributed, and by exercising the franchise men and women presumably determine who their rulers will be, and therefore what their rulers presumably must do if they are to remain rulers.

Since analysts of power also live within the boundaries of ritual and belief of their society, they have contributed to this obfuscation by arguing that electoral arrangements offset other bases of power. Even the most sophisticated American political scientists have begun with the assumption that there are in fact two systems of power, one based on wealth and one based on votes, and they have devoted themselves to deciphering the relative influence of these two systems. This question has been regarded as intricate and complicated, demanding assiduous investigations in a variety of political settings, and by methods subject to the most rigorous empirical strictures. (“Nothing categorical can be assumed about power in any community” was Polksby’s famous dictum.) The answer that emerged from these investigations was that electoral-representative procedures accomplished a substantial dispersal of power in a less-than-perfect world. It followed that those who struggled against their rulers by defying the procedures of the liberal democratic state were dangerous troublemakers, or simply fools.

In the 1960s the dominant pluralist tradition was discredited, at least among those on the ideological left who were prodded by outbreaks of defiance among minorities and students to question this perspective. In the critique that emerged it was argued that there were not two systems of power, but that the power rooted in wealth and force overwhelmed the power of the franchise. The pluralists had erred, the critics said, by failing to recognize the manifold ways in which wealth and its concomitants engulfed electoral-representative procedures, effectively barring many people from participation while deluding and entrapping others into predetermined electoral “choices.” The pluralists had also erred by ignoring the consistent bias toward the interests of elites inherent in presumably neutral governing structures, no matter what the mandate of the electorate.

We do not wish to summarize the critique, which was by no means simple, or all of a piece. We wish only to make the point that the challenge rested in large part on the insight that modes of participation and nonparticipation in electoral-representative procedures were not, as the pluralists had implied by their narrow empirical strictures, the freely made political choices of free men and women. Rather, modes of participation, and the degree of influence that resulted, were consistently determined by location in the class structure. It was an important insight, and once it had been achieved the conclusion followed not far behind that so long as lower-class groups abided by the norms governing the electoral-representative system, they would have little influence. It therefore became clear, at least to some of us, that protest tactics which defied political norms were not simply the recourse of troublemakers and fools. For the poor, they were the only recourse.

But having come this far, we have gone no further. The insights that illuminated the critiques of electoral-representative processes have been entirely overlooked in the few studies that have been done of the nature of protest itself. From an intellectual perspective, it is a startling oversight; from a political perspective, it is all too easily explained by the overwhelming biases of our traditions. Briefly stated, the main argument of this chapter is that protest is also not a matter of free choice: it is not freely available to all groups at all times, and much of the time it is not available to lower-class groups at all. The occasions when protest is possible among the poor, the forms that it must take, and the impact it can have are all delimited by the social structure in ways which usually diminish its extent and diminish its force. Before we go on to explain these points, we need to define what we mean by a protest movement, for customary definitions have led both analysts and activists to ignore or discredit much protest that does occur.

The emergence of a protest movement entails a transformation both of consciousness and of behavior. The change in consciousness has at least three distinct aspects. First, “the system”—or those
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aspects of the system that people experience and perceive—loses legitimacy. Large numbers of men and women who ordinarily accept the authority of their rulers and the legitimacy of institutional arrangements come to believe in some measure that these rulers and these arrangements are unjust and wrong. Second, people who are ordinarily fatalistic, who believe that existing arrangements are inevitable, begin to assert ‘rights’ that imply demands for change. Third, there is a new sense of efficacy; people who ordinarily consider themselves helpless come to believe that they have some capacity to alter their lot.

The change in behavior is equally striking, and usually more easily recognized, at least when it takes the form of mass strikes or marches or riots. Such behavior seems to us to involve two distinguishing elements. First, masses of people become defiant; they violate the traditions and laws to which they ordinarily acquiesce, and they flaunt the authorities to whom they ordinarily defer. And second, their defiance is acted out collectively, as members of a group, and not as isolated individuals. Strikes and riots are clearly forms of collective action, but even some forms of defiance which appear to be individual acts, such as crime or school truancy or incendiaryism, while more ambiguous, may have a collective dimension, for those who engage in these acts may consider themselves to be part of a larger movement. Such apparently atomized acts of defiance can be considered movement events when those involved perceive themselves to be acting as members of a group, and when they share a common set of protest beliefs.

Prevailing definitions, by stressing articulated social change goals as the defining feature of social movements, have had the effect of denying political meaning to many forms of protest. Thus while the impulse to proliferate idiocentric usages ought ordinarily to be resisted, we believe that the difference between our definition and those generally found in the fairly extensive sociological literature on social movements is no mere definitional quibble. Joseph Gusfield,

1 In this connection Max Weber wrote: "The degree in which 'communal action' and possibly 'societal action,' emerges from the 'mass actions' of the members of a class is linked to general cultural conditions, especially to those of an intellectual sort. It is also linked to the extent of the contrasts that have already evolved, and is especially linked to the transparency of the connections between the causes and the consequences of the 'class situation.' For however different life chances may be, this fact in itself, according to all experience, by no means gives birth to 'class action . . . .'" (184, emphasis in the original).

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for example, defines a social movement as "socially shared activities and beliefs directed toward the demand for change in some aspect of the social order . . . . What characterizes a social movement as a particular kind of change agent is its quality as an articulated and organized group" (2, 453). Similarly John Wilson says: "A social movement is a conscious, collective, organized attempt to bring about or resist large-scale change in the social order by noninstitutionalized means" (8).

The stress on conscious intentions in these usages reflects a confusion in the literature between the mass movement on the one hand, and the formalized organizations which tend to emerge on the crest of the movement on the other hand—two intertwined but distinct phenomena. Thus formalized organizations do put forward articulated and agreed-upon social change goals, as suggested by these definitions, but such goals may not be apparent in mass uprisings (although others, including ourselves as observers and analysts, may well impute goals to uprisings). Furthermore our emphasis is on collective defiance as the key and distinguishing feature of a protest movement, but defiance tends to be omitted or understated in standard definitions simply because defiance does not usually characterize the activities of formal organizations that arise on the crest of protest movements.

Whatever the intellectual sources of error, the effect of equating movements with movement organizations—and thus requiring that protest have a leader, a constitution, a legislative program, or at least a banner before they are recognized as such—is to divert attention from many forms of political unrest and to consign them by definition to the more shadowy realms of social problems and deviant behavior. As a result such events as massive school truancy or rising worker absenteeism or mounting applications for public welfare or spreading rent defaults rarely attract the attention of political analysts. Having decided by definitional fiat that nothing political has occurred, nothing has to be explained, at least not in the terms of political protest. And having contrived in this way not to recognize protest or to study it, we cannot ask certain rather obvious and important questions about it.

2 Thus, Zald and Ash use the term "social movement organizations" to encompass both forms of social action. Robert Ash does, in her later work, distinguish between movements and movement organizations, but she continues to stress articulated goals as a defining feature of a movement.
Institutional Limits on the Incidence of Mass Insurgency

Aristotle believed that the chief cause of internal warfare was inequality, that the lesser rebel in order to be equal. But human experience has proved him wrong, most of the time. Sharp inequality has been constant, but rebellion infrequent. Aristotle underestimated the controlling force of the social structure on political life. However hard their lot may be, people usually remain acquiescent, conforming to the accustomed patterns of daily life in their community, and believing those patterns to be both inevitable and just. Men and women till the fields each day, or stove the furnaces, or tend the looms, obeying the rules and rhythms of earning a livelihood; they mate and bear children hopefully, and mutely watch them die; they abide by the laws of church and community and defer to their rulers, striving to earn a little grace and esteem. In other words most of the time people conform to the institutional arrangements which enmesh them, which regulate the rewards and penalties of daily life, and which appear to be the only possible reality.

Those for whom the rewards are most meager, who are the most oppressed by inequality, are also acquiescent. Sometimes they are the most acquiescent, for they have little defense against the penalties that can be imposed for defiance. Moreover, at most times and in most places, and especially in the United States, the poor are led to believe that their destitution is deserved, and that the riches and power that others command are also deserved. In more traditional societies sharp inequalities are thought to be divinely ordained, or to be a part of the natural order of things. In more modern societies, such as the United States, riches and power are ascribed to personal qualities of industry or talent; it follows that those who have little or nothing have only what they deserve. As Edelman observes in his study of American political beliefs:

The American poor have required less coercion and less in social security guarantees to maintain their quiescence than has been true in other developed countries, even authoritarian ones like Germany and notably poor ones like Italy; for the guilt and self-concepts of the poor have kept them docile (1971, 56).

Ordinarily, in short, the lower classes accept their lot, and that acceptance can be taken for granted; it need not be bargained for by their rulers. This capacity of the institutions of a society to enforce political docility is the most obvious way in which protest is socially structured, in the sense that it is structurally precluded most of the time.

Sometimes, however, the poor do become defiant. They challenge traditional authorities, and the rules laid down by those authorities. They demand redress for their grievances. American history is punctuated by such events, from the first uprisings by freeholders, tenants, and slaves in colonial America, to the postrevolutionary debtor rebellions, through the periodic eruptions of strikes and riots by industrial workers, to the ghetto riots of the twentieth century. In each instance, masses of the poor were somehow able, if only briefly, to overcome the shame bred by a culture which blames them for their plight; somehow they were able to break the bonds of conformity enforced by work, by family, by community, by every strand of institutional life; somehow they were able to overcome the fears induced by police, by militia, by company guards.

When protest does arise, when masses of those who are ordinarily docile become defiant, a major transformation has occurred. Most of the literature on popular insurgency has been devoted to identifying the preconditions of this transformation (often out of a concern for preventing or curbing the resulting political disturbances). Whatever the disagreements among different schools of thought, and they are substantial, there is general agreement that the emergence of popular uprisings reflects profound changes in the larger society. This area of agreement is itself important, for it is another way of stating our proposition that protest is usually structurally precluded. The agreement is that only under exceptional conditions will the lower classes become defiant—and thus, in our terms, only under exceptional conditions are the lower classes afforded the socially determined opportunity to press for their own class interests.

The validity of this point follows from any of the major theories of civil disorder considered alone. When the several theoretical perspectives are considered concurrently and examined in the light of the historical events analyzed in this book, the conclusion is suggested that while different theories emphasize different kinds of social dislocations, most of these dislocations occurred simultaneously in the 1930s and 1960s. One does not have to believe that the various major theoretical perspectives are equally valid to agree that they may all cast at least some light on the series of dislocations that preceded the eruption of protest, at least in the periods we study. This
argues that it not only requires a major social dislocation before protest can emerge, but that a sequence or combination of dislocations probably must occur before the anger that underlies protest builds to a high pitch, and before that anger can find expression in collective defiance.

It seems useful to divide perspectives on insurgency according to whether the emphasis is on pressures that force eruptions, or whether the emphasis is on the breakdown of the regulatory capacity of the society, a breakdown that permits eruptions to occur and to take form in political protest. Thus among the "pressure" theorists one might include those who emphasize economic change as a precondition for civil disorder, whether economic improvement or immiseration. Sharp economic change obviously disturbs the relationship between what men and women have been led to expect, and the conditions they actually experience. If people have been led to expect more than they receive, they are likely to feel frustration and anger. Some analysts, following de Tocqueville, emphasize the frustration produced by periods of economic improvement which may generate expectations that outpace the rate of actual economic gain. Others, following more closely in the tradition of Marx and Engels, emphasize that it is new and unexpected hardships that generate frustration and anger, and the potential for civil strife. However, this disagreement, as others have noted, is not theoretically irreconcilable.

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Footnotes:

8 Perhaps the best known exponent of this widely held "relative deprivation" theory of civil strife is Ted Robert Gurr (1968, 1970). See also Feierabend, Feierabend, and Nesvold. For an excellent critique of the political theorists who base their work on this theory, see Lupsha.

9 Both de Tocqueville and his followers include conditions of political liberalization, and the rising political expectations that result, as possible precursors of civil strife. Probably the most well-known of the contemporary "rising expectations" theorists is James C. Davies, who, however, argues a variant of the theory known as the "J-Curve." According to Davies, it is only when long periods of improvement are followed by economic downturns or political repression that civil strife results (1962).

10 The views of Marx and Engels are, however, both more historically specific and comprehensive than the relative deprivation theory, and might be better described as not inconsistent with that theory. Economic crises, and the attendant hardships, activate proletarian struggles not only because of the extreme immiseration of the proletariat at such times, and not only because of the expansion of the reserve army of the unemployed at such times, but because periods of economic crisis reveal the contradictions between socialized productive forces and the anarchy of private ownership and exchange. In Engels' words, "The mode of production rises in rebellion against the form of exchange. The bourgeoisie are convicted of incapacity further to manage their own social productive forces" (1967). Deprivation, in other words, is only a symptom of a far more profound conflict which cannot be resolved within the existing social formation.

11 George Hansel points out that rising expectations and relative deprivation hypotheses (as well as status inconsistency hypotheses) are theoretically reconcileable.

12 Barrington Moore asserts bluntly that the main urban revolutionary movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries "were all revolutions of desperation, certainly not of rising expectations, as some liberal theorists of revolution might lead one to anticipate." Snyder and Tilly, however, seem to disagree, and report that at least short-term fluctuations in prices and industrial production did not predict the incidence of collective violence in nineteenth- and twentieth-century France (1978).
such as Hobson, who emphasizes the breakdown of the regulatory controls implicit in the structures and routines of daily life; to those such as Kornhauser, who argues that major societal changes—depression, industrialization, urbanization—break the ties that bind people to the multiple secondary associations that ordinarily control political behavior (1959); to those who focus on divisions among elites as the trigger that releases popular discontents. Taken together, these social disorganization perspectives provide a major insight, however general, into the links between societal change, the breakdown of social controls—what Ash calls the “deroutinization” of life (164–167)—and the eruption of protest. The disorganization theories suggest that periods of rapid change tend, at the same time as they build frustration, to weaken the regulatory controls inherent in the structures of institutional life.

More specifically, economic change may be so jarring as to virtually destroy the structures and routines of daily life. Hobson points to the impact of just such conditions in accounting for the rise of “social banditry” among the Italian peasantry in the nineteenth century:

[Social banditry] is most likely to become a major phenomenon when their traditional equilibrium is upset: during and after periods of abnormal hardship, such as famines and wars, or at the moments when the jaws of the dynamic modern world seize the static communities in order to destroy and transform them (1968, 24).

Barrington Moore stresses a similar theme:

The main factors that create a revolutionary mass are a sudden increase in hardship coming on top of quite serious deprivations,

8 Just as the relative deprivation theories are not inconsistent with a Marxist interpretation of the origins of working-class protest, neither is the emphasis on social disorganization necessarily inconsistent (although most of the proponents of that perspective are clearly not Marxists). Thus a Marxist interpretation of protest would acknowledge the significance of both relative deprivation and social disorganization, treating these however not as historically generalizable causes of uprisings, but as symptoms of historically specific contradictions in capitalist society. Bertell Ollman’s work on character structure as inhibiting class consciousness and class action contributes to making explicit the link between social disorganization and mass uprisings from a Marxist perspective. Ollman argues that the “proletariat’s fear of freedom” and their submissiveness before authority . . . are, after all, simply attempts to repeat in the future what has been done in the past” (49). But clearly, periods of major social dislocation may force a break in these character patterns, if only by precluding the possibility of repeating in the future what has been done in the past.

9 It ought to be noted that Charles Tilly, in his influential work on collective violence in nineteenth-century France, does not confirm the generally accepted view that there is a relationship between crime and collective violence, or between either of these variables and the presumably disorganizing impact of urban growth. However, the evidence suggests that these relationships did hold in the periods which we investigate in the twentieth-century United States, and we do not consider the issue yet settled. In other respects, as we will note, we agree with Tilly’s alternative emphasis on resource shifts as a precondition for collective struggle. See Tilly (1969), and Lodhi and Tilly (1973).
arrangements. Still, neither the frustrations generated by the economic change, nor the breakdown of daily life, may be sufficient to lead people to protest their travails. Ordinarily, when people suffer such hardships, they blame God, or they blame themselves.

For a protest movement to arise out of these traumas of daily life, people have to perceive the deprivation and disorganization they experience as both wrong and subject to redress. The social arrangements that are ordinarily perceived as just and immutable must come to seem both unjust and mutable. One condition favoring this transvaluation is the scale of distress. Thus in the 1930s, and again in the postwar years, unemployment reached calamitous proportions. Large numbers of people lost their means of earning a livelihood at the same time. This was clearly the case in the 1930s when unemployment affected one-third of the work force. But among blacks the experience in the post–World War II period was equally devastating, for millions were forced off the land and concentrated in the ghettos of the cities. Within these central city ghettos, unemployment rates in the 1950s and 1960s reached depression levels. The sheer scale of these dislocations helped to mute the sense of self-blame, predisposing men and women to view their plight as a collective one, and to blame their rulers for the destitution and disorganization they experienced.

This transvaluation is even more likely to take place, or to take place more rapidly, when the dislocations suffered by particular groups occur in a context of wider changes and instability, at times when the dominant institutional arrangements of the society, as people understand them, are self-evidently not functioning. When the mammoth industrial empires of the United States virtually ground to a halt in the early 1930s and the banks of the country simply closed their doors, the “American Way” could not be so fully taken for granted by the masses of impoverished workers and the unemployed. Similarly, while the institutional disturbances that preceded the black movements of the 1960s were not dramatically visible to the society as a whole, they were to the people who were uprooted by them. For blacks, changes in the southern economy meant nothing

31 Roberta Ash ascribes the politicization of Boston mobs during the revolutionary period to this process. As the discontented wealthy sought allies among the poor, street gangs were transformed into organized militias in the political struggle (70–73).

32 Hobson and Rudé make the same point about the English farm laborers’ protests against enclosure: “[T]hey were reluctant to believe . . . that the King’s government and Parliament were against them. For how could the format of justice be against justice?” (65).
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Nor is this tendency only observable among Russian peasants. Crowds of welfare recipients demonstrating for special grants in New York City in May 1968 employed a similar justification, inciting each other with the news that a rich woman had died and left instructions that her wealth be distributed through the welfare centers. These events suggest that people seek to legitimate what they do, even when they are defiant, and the authority of elites to define what is legitimate remains powerful, even during periods of stress and disorder.

Our main point, however, is that whatever position one takes on the “causes” of mass unrest, there is general agreement that extraordinary disturbances in the larger society are required to transform the poor from apathy to hope, from quiescence to indignation. On this point, if no other, theorists of the most diverse persuasions agree. Moreover, there is reason to think that a series of concurrent dislocations underlay the mass protests of the 1930s and 1960s. And with that said, the implication for an understanding of the potential for political influence among the poor becomes virtually self-evident: since periods of profound social dislocations are infrequent, so too are opportunities for protest among the lower classes.

The Patterning of Insurgency

Just as quiescence is enforced by institutional life, and just as the eruption of discontent is determined by changes in institutional life, the forms of political protest are also determined by the institutional context in which people live and work. This point seems self-evident to us, but it is usually ignored, in part because the pluralist tradition defines political action as essentially a matter of choice. Political actors, whoever they may be, are treated as if they are not con-

stricted by a social environment in deciding upon one political strategy or another; it is as if the strategies employed by different groups were freely elected, rather than the result of constraints imposed by their location in the social structure. In this section, we turn, in the most preliminary way, to a discussion of the ways in which the expression of defiance is patterned by features of institutional life.

THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM AS A STRUCTURING INSTITUTION

In the United States the principal structuring institution, at least in the early phases of protest, is the electoral-representative system. The significance of this assertion is not that the electoral system provides an avenue of influence under normal circumstances. To the contrary, we shall demonstrate that it is usually when unrest among the lower classes breaks out of the confines of electoral procedures that the poor may have some influence, for the instability and polarization they then threaten to create by their actions in the factories or in the streets may force some response from electoral leaders. But whether action emerges in the factories or the streets may depend on the course of the early phase of protest at the polls.

Ordinarily defiance is first expressed in the voting booth simply because, whether defiant or not, people have been socialized within a political culture that defines voting as the mechanism through which political change can and should properly occur. The vitality of this political culture, the controlling force of the norms that guide political discontent into electoral channels, is not understood merely by asserting the pervasiveness of liberal political ideology in the United States and the absence of competing ideologies, for that is precisely what has to be explained. Some illumination is provided by certain features of the electoral system itself, by its rituals and celebrations and rewards, for these practices help to ensure the persistence of confidence in electoral procedures. Thus it is significant that the franchise was extended to white working-class men at a very early period in the history of the United States, and that a vigorous system of local government developed. Through these mechanisms, large proportions of the population were embraced by the rituals of electoral campaigns, and shared in the symbolic rewards of the
electoral system, while some also shared in the tangible rewards of a relatively freely dispensed government patronage. Beliefs thus nurtured do not erode readily.

Accordingly, one of the first signs of popular discontent in the contemporary United States is usually a sharp shift in traditional voting patterns. In a sense, the electoral system serves to measure and register the extent of the emerging disaffection. Thus, the urban working class reacted to economic catastrophe in the landslide election of 1932 by turning against the Republican Party to which it had given its allegiance more or less since 1896. Similarly, the political impact of the forces of modernization and migration was first evident in the crucial presidential elections of 1956 and 1960. Urban blacks, who had voted Democratic in successively larger proportions since

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14 The tendency for popular discontent to lead to third-party efforts is of course also evidence of the force of electoral norms. Thus as early as the depression of 1829–1831, labor unrest was expressed in the rise of numerous workingman’s political parties, and late in the nineteenth century as the industrial working class grew, much labor discontent was channeled into socialist political parties, some of which achieved modest success at the local level. In 1901 the Socialist Party came together as a coalition of many of these groups, and by 1912 it had elected 1,200 party members to local public offices in some 500 cities and towns, including the mayor’s office in 73 cities (Weinstein, 7). Similarly the agrarian movements of the late nineteenth century were primarily oriented toward the electoral system. Nor is this tendency only evident in the United States. In Europe, for example, with the disillusionment of the failed revolution of 1848, and with the gradual extension of the franchise to workers, socialists also began to emphasize parliamentary tactics. The classical justification for this emphasis became Engels’ introduction to Class Struggles in France, in which Engels writes of the successes achieved by the German party through the parliamentary vote: “It has been discovered that the political institutions in which the domination of the bourgeoisie is organized offer a fulcrum by means of which the proletariat can combat these very political institutions. The Social Democrats have participated in the elections to the various Diet, to municipal councils, and to industrial councils. Wherever the proletariat could secure an effective voice, the occupation of these electoral strongholds by the bourgeoisie has been contested. Consequently, the bourgeoisie and the government have become much more alarmed at the legal than at the illegal activities of the labor party, a dread of the results of elections far more than they dread the results of rebellion.” Some years later, Kautsky published a letter from Engels disavowing the preface and blaming it on the “amid legalism” of the leaders of the German Social Democratic Party who were committed to the parliamentary activities through which the party was thriving, and fearful of the threatened passage of antisocialist laws by the Reichstag (see How, 363; Michel, 370 in 6).

15 Burkhart’s well-known theory of “critical elections” resulting from the cumulative tension between socio-economic developments and the political system is similar to this argument (1965, 1970). The relationship between economic conditions and voter responses has been subjected to extensive empirical study by American political scientists. These studies, generally tend to confirm the proposition that deteriorating economic conditions result in voter defections from incumbent parties. See for example Bloom and Price; Kramer; and Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes.

16 Edelman ascribes the influence of public officials as “powerful shapers of perceptions” to their virtual monopoly on certain kinds of information, to the legitimacy of the regime with which they are identified, and to the intense identification of people with the state (103–105).

17 Our conviction that the demands of the protestors, at least for the periods we examine, are shaped as much by their interaction with the regime as by the structural factors (or contradictions) which produced the movements is one difference between this analysis and some Marxist interpretations. Thus if one explains the origins of protest by the breakdown of social controls, or by relative deprivation, but by the basic and irreversible contradictions that characterize capitalist institutions, then the political agenda the movement evolves to reflect those basic and irreversible contradictions. Hence it would follow that working-class and lower-class movements arising in a corporate capitalist society are democratic and egalitarian or, in an older terminology, progressive, and not ultimately convertible. Manuel Castells, for example, who has done some of the best work on social movements from a Marxist perspective, defines a movement as “a certain type of organization of social practices, the logic of whose development contradicts the institutionally dominant social logic” (93). By his definition Castells thus minimizes a host of problems in evaluating the political directions of social movements that historical experience unfortunately does not minimize. See also Uzum (1975, 27–35). Or, in another terminology, we do not take it for granted that conscious or subjective orientations of action approximate objective class interests (see Dahrendorf (194–195) and Balbus for a discussion of this distinction).
But when people are thus encouraged in spirit without being appeased in fact, their defiance may escape the boundaries of electoral rituals, and escape the boundaries established by the political norms of the electoral-representative system in general. They may indeed become rebellious, but while their rebellion often appears chaotic from the perspective of conventional American politics, or from the perspective of some organizers, it is not chaotic at all; it is structured political behavior. When people riot in the streets, their behavior is socially patterned, and within these patterns, their actions are to some extent deliberate and purposeful.

SOCIAL LOCATION AND FORMS OF DEFANCE

In contrast to the effort expended in accounting for the sources of insurgency, relatively little attention has been given to the question of why insurgency, when it does occur, takes one form and not another. Why, in other words, do people sometimes strike and at other times boycott, loot, or burn? Perhaps this question is seldom dealt with because the defiant behavior released often appears inchoate to analysts, and therefore not susceptible to explanation, as in the nineteenth-century view of mental illness. Thus Parsons characterizes reactions to strain as “irrational” (1965); Neil Smelser describes collective behavior as “primitive” and “magical”; and Kornhauser attributes unstable, extremist, and antidemocratic tendencies to mass movements. Many defiant forms of mass action that fall short of armed uprisings are thus often simply not recognized as intelligent political behavior at all.

The common but false association of lower-class protest with violence may also be a residue of this tradition and its view of the mob as normless and dangerous, the barbarian unchained. Mass violence is, to be sure, one of many forms of defiance, and perhaps a very elemental form, for it violates the very ground rules of civil society. And lower-class groups do on occasion resort to violence—to the destruction of property and persons—and perhaps this is more likely to be the case when they are deprived by their institutional location of the opportunity to use other forms of defiance. More typically, however, they are not violent, although they may be milit-

tant. They are usually not violent simply because the risks are too great; the penalties attached to the use of violence by the poor are too fearsome and too overwhelming. (Of course, defiance by the lower class frequently results in violence when more powerful groups, discontented or alarmed by the unreasonableness of the poor, use force to coerce them into docility. The substantial record of violence associated with protest movements in the United States is a record composed overwhelmingly of the casualties suffered by protestors at the hands of public or private armies.)

Such perspectives have left us with images which serve to discredit lower-class movements by denying them meaning and legitimacy, instead of providing explanations. While the weakening of social controls that accompanies ruptures in social life may be an important precondition for popular uprisings, it does not follow either that the infrastructure of social life simply collapses, or that those who react to these disturbances by protesting are those who suffer the sharpest personal disorientation and alienation. To the contrary it may well be those whose lives are rooted in some institutional context, who are in regular relationships with others in similar straits, who are best able to redefine their travails as the fault of their rulers and not of themselves, and are best able to join together in collective protest. Thus while many of the southern blacks who participated in the civil rights movement were poor, recent migrants to the southern cities, or were unemployed, they were also linked together in the

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28 Gansser argues convincingly that rational calculations of the chances of success underlie. “Violence should be viewed as an instrumental act, aimed at furthering the purpose of the group that uses it when they have some reason to think it will help their cause. . . . [I]t grows from an impatience born of confidence and rising efficacy rather than the opposite. It occurs when hostility toward the victim renders it a relatively safe and costly strategy” (81).

29 It may be for this reason that the extensive data collected after the ghetto riots of the 1960s on the characteristics of rioters and nonrioters provided little evidence that the rioters themselves were more likely to be recent migrants or less educated or suffer higher rates of unemployment than the ghetto population as a whole. But while there are data to indicate that the rioters did not suffer higher indices of ‘rootlessness,’ little is known about the networks or structures through which their defiance was mobilized. Tilly speculates interestingly on the relation between integration and deprivation by suggesting that the more integrated shopkeepers and artisans of Paris may have led the great outburst of the French Revolution precisely because they were in a better position to do so, and because they had a kind of leadership role, and were therefore responsive to the misery of the hordes of more impoverished Parisians (1964). Hobsbawm and Rudé ascribe a similar role to local artisans in the English farm laborers’ protests of the early nineteenth century (1983, 63–66).
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Just as electoral political institutions channel protest into voter activity in the United States, and may even confine it within these spheres if the disturbance is not severe and the electoral system appears responsive, so do other features of institutional life determine the forms that protest takes when it breaks out of the boundaries of electoral politics. Thus, it is no accident that some people strike, others riot, or loot the granaries, or burn the machines, for just as the patterns of daily life ordinarily assure mass quiescence, so do these same patterns influence the form defiance will take when it erupts.

First, people experience deprivation and oppression within a concrete setting, not as the end product of large and abstract processes, and it is the concrete experience that molds their discontent into specific grievances against specific targets. Workers experience the factory, the speeding rhythm of the assembly line, the foreman, the spies and the guards, the owner and the paycheck. They do not experience monopoly capitalism. People on relief experience the shabby waiting rooms, the overseer or the caseworker, and the dole. They do not experience American social welfare policy. Tenants experience the leaking ceilings and cold radiators, and they recognize the landlord. They do not recognize the banking, real estate, and construction systems. No small wonder, therefore, that when the poor rebel they so often rebel against the overseer of the poor, or the slumlord, or the meddlesome merchant, and not against the banks or the governing elites to whom the overseer, the slumlord, and the merchant also defer. In other words, it is the daily experience of people that shapes their grievances, establishes the measure of their demands, and points out the targets of their anger.

Second, institutional patterns shape mass movements by shaping the collectivity out of which protest can arise. Institutional life aggregates people or disperses them, molds group identities, and draws people into the settings within which collective action can erupt. Thus factory work gathers men and women together, educates them in a common experience, and educates them to the possibilities of cooperation and collective action. Casual laborers or petty entrepreneurs, by contrast, are dispersed by their occupations, and are therefore less likely to perceive their commonalities of position, and less likely to join together in collective action.

Third, and most important, institutional roles determine the strategic opportunities for defiance, for it is typically by rebelling against the rules and authorities associated with their everyday activities that people protest. Thus workers protest by striking. They are able to do so because they are drawn together in the factory setting, and their protests consist mainly in defying the rules and authorities associated with the workplace. The unemployed do not and cannot strike, even when they perceive that those who own the factories and businesses are to blame for their troubles. Instead, they riot in the

than into the pockets of the manufacturers or the business executives" (180). Michael Schwartz illustrates this point in a study of the Southern Farmers' Alliance. The Texas members of the alliances singled out landlords and merchants as the target of their demands, and not the banks, speculators, and railroads who were ultimately responsible for their plight, because the tenant farmers had direct experience with the landlords and merchants.

马克思和恩格斯在关于革命无产阶级条件的研究中也作出了类似的论述。"但随着工业的发展，无产阶级不仅人数在增加，它还会扩大到更多的领域，它需要扩大其影响力。在这两种情况下，统治阶级是其主要的敌对目标，因为它们既不希望通过新的劳工关系来确保自己的利益，也不希望通过制造新的矛盾来达到自己的目的。但是，通过这些方式，人们将不得不通过与政府的斗争来创造新的矛盾。"（1968, 123-124）。这种观点与革命潜能的无产阶级社会不平等的性质是密切相关的。正如戈登·爱德华兹和里奇所指出的，对于这一发展来说，应该有一系列的策略。
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It is our second general point, then, that the opportunities for
defiance are structured by features of institutional life. Simply put,
people cannot defy institutions to which they have no access, and to
which they make no contribution.

The Limited Impact of Mass Defiance

If mass defiance is neither freely available nor the forms it takes
freely determined, it must also be said that it is generally of limited
political impact. Still, some forms of protest appear to have more
impact than others, thus posing an analytical question of
considerable importance. It is a question, however, that analysts of
movements, especially analysts of contemporary American movements,
have not generally asked. The literature abounds with studies of the
social origins of protestors, the determinants of leadership styles, the
struggles to cope with problems of organizational maintenance. Thus
protest seems to be wondered about mainly for the many and
fascinating aspects of social life which it exposes, but least of all for
its chief significance: namely, that it is the means by which the least
privileged seek to wrest concessions from their rulers.

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28 This is perhaps what G. L. R. James means when he writes: "Workers are at their
very best in collective action in the circumstances of their daily activity or crises arising
from it" (95). Richard Flacks has also made a related argument regarding the
importance of what he calls "everyday life" in shaping popular movements.

29 Michael Lipsky's work is in a way an exception to these assertions, for he sets out
specifically to evaluate protest as a strategy for achieving political goals (1968, 1970).
The flaw in Lipsky's work is not in his theoretical objective, which is important, but
in his understanding of what it is that he is evaluating: Protest strategies, in Lipsky's
view, consist primarily of "showmanship" by powerless groups to gain the attention of
potential sympathizers or "reference publics." But by this definition, Lipsky rules out
the historically most important forms of lower-class protest, such as strikes and riots.
Lipsky was led to define protest so narrowly by the New York City rent strike on which
his analysis is based, for that particular event, as Lipsky clearly shows, did consist
primarily of speeches and press releases, and very little rent striking. Small wonder,
therefore, that the outcome of the rent strike was determined by a scattering of liberal
reform groups, provoked as they always have been by scandalous stories of slum
housing, and appeared as they always have been by purely symbolic if not sentimental
gestures. And small wonder that the slums remained and worsened. Lipsky concludes from
this experience that protest is a weak and unstable resource, and that whatever responses
are made by government will depend wholly on whether significant third parties share
the protestors' objectives. But this conclusion, while valid for the particular case Lipsky
studied, seems to us unwarranted as a generalization about protest. In our view, protest

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It is our judgment that the most useful way to think about the effectiveness of protest is to examine the disruptive effects on institutions of different forms of mass defiance, and then to examine the political reverberations of those disruptions. The impact of mass defiance is, in other words, not so much directly as indirectly felt. Protest is more likely to have a seriously disruptive impact when the protestors play a central role in an institution, and it is more likely to evoke wider political reverberations when powerful groups have large stakes in the disrupted institution. These relationships are almost totally ignored in the literature on social movements; there are no studies that catalogue and examine forms of defiance, the settings in which defiance is acted out, the institutional disruptions that do or do not result, and the varying political reverberations of these institutional disruptions.

THE LIMITS OF INSTITUTIONAL DISRUPTION

To refer to an institutional disruption is simply to note the obvious fact that institutional life depends upon conformity with established roles and compliance with established rules. Defiance may thus obstruct the normal operations of institutions. Factories are shut down when workers walk out or sit down; welfare bureaucracies are thrown into chaos when crowds demand relief; landlords may be bankrupted when tenants refuse to pay rent. In each of these cases, people cease to conform to accustomed institutional roles; they withhold their accustomed cooperation, and by doing so, cause institutional disruptions.

By our definition, disruption is simply the application of a negative sanction, the withdrawal of a crucial contribution on which others depend, and it is therefore a natural resource for exerting power over others. This form of power is, in fact, regularly employed by individuals and groups linked together in many kinds of cooperation that consists merely of what Lipsky calls “noise” is hardly a resource at all, because it is hardly protest at all. Moreover, the responses that reference publics make to showmanship are of course weak and tokenistic. Reference publics do play a crucial role in determining responses to protest, not when they are provoked by “noise,” but when they are provoked by the serious institutional disruptions attendant upon mass defiance.

But the amount of leverage that a group gains by applying such negative sanctions is widely variable. Influence depends, first of all, on whether or not the contribution withheld is crucial to others; second, on whether or not those who have been affected by the disruption have resources to be conceded; and third, on whether the obstructionist group can protect itself adequately from reprisals. Once these criteria are stated, it becomes evident that the poor are usually in the least strategic position to benefit from defiance.

Thus, in comparison with most producer groups, the lower classes are often in weak institutional locations to use disruption as a tactic for influence. Many among the lower class are in locations that make their cooperation less than crucial to the operation of major institutions. Those who work in economically marginal enterprises, or who perform marginally necessary functions in major enterprises, or those who are unemployed, do not perform roles on which major institutions depend. Indeed, some of the poor are sometimes so isolated from significant institutional participation that the only “contribution” they can withhold is that of quiescence in civil life: they can riot.

Moreover, those who manage the institutions in which many of the lower classes find themselves often have little to concede to disruptors. When lower-class groups do play an important role in an institution, as they do in sweatshops or in slum tenements, these institutions—operated as they often are by marginal entrepreneurs—may be incapable of yielding very much in response to disruptive pressure.

Finally, lower-class groups have little ability to protect themselves against reprisals that can be employed by institutional managers.

36 Spencer, McLoughlin, and Lawson, in their historical study of New York City tenant movements, provide an interesting example of the use of disruption, not by the tenants, but by the banks. Thus when Langdon Post, the Tenement House Commissioner under LaGuardia, tried to initiate a campaign to force compliance with the housing code, “five savings banks owning 400 buildings on the Lower East Side threatened to vacate rather than comply. The president of the New York City Taxpayers’ Union warned that 40,000 tenements would be abandoned.” Post withdrew his threat (69).
The poor do not have to be historians of the occasions when protesters have been jailed or shot down to understand this point. The lesson of their vulnerability is engraved in everyday life; it is evident in every police beating, in every eviction, in every lost job, in every relief termination. The very labels used to describe defiance by the lower classes—the pejorative labels of illegality and violence—testify to this vulnerability and serve to justify severe reprisals when they are imposed. By taking such labels for granted, we fail to recognize what these events really represent: a structure of political coercion inherent in the everyday life of the lower classes.

We can now comment on the association of disruption with spontaneity, perhaps another relic of traditional ways of thinking about lower-class uprisings, although here the issue is a little more complicated. Disruption itself is not necessarily spontaneous, but lower-class disruptions often are, in the sense that they are not planned and executed by formal organizations. In part, this testifies to the paucity of stable organizational resources among the poor, as well as to the cautious and moderate character of such organizations as are able to survive. But even if formal organizations existed, and even if they were not committed by the exigencies of their own survival to more cautious tactics, the circumstances that lead to mass defiance by the lower class are extremely difficult to predict; and once defiance erupts, its direction is difficult for leaders to control.

Rosa Luxemburg’s discussion of the mass strike is pertinent:

...the mass strike is not artificially “made,” not “decided” out of the blue, not “propagated,” but rather it is an historical phenomenon which at a certain moment follows with historical necessity from the social relations... If anyone were to undertake to make the mass strike in general, as one form of proletarian action, the object of methodical agitation, and to go house to house peddling this “idea” in order gradually to win the working class to it, it would be as idle, as profitless, and as crazy an occupation as it would be to seek to make the idea of the revolution or of the barricade struggle into the object of a particular agitation... (231–245).

Still, if the lower classes do not ordinarily have great disruptive power, and if the use of even that kind of power is not planned, it is the only power they do have. Their use of that power, the weighing of gains and risks, is not calculated in board rooms; it wells up out of the terrible travails that people experience at times of rupture and stress. And at such times, disruptions by the poor may have reverberations that go beyond the institutions in which the disruption is acted out.

**THE LIMITS OF POLITICAL DISRUPTION**

It is not the impact of disruptions on particular institutions that finally tests the power of the poor; it is the political impact of these disruptions. At this level, however, a new set of structuring mechanisms intervenes, for the political impact of institutional disruptions is mediated by the electoral-representative system.

Responses to disruption vary depending on electoral conditions. Ordinarily, during periods of stability, governmental leaders have three rather obvious options when an institutional disruption occurs. They may ignore it; they may employ punitive measures against the disruptors; or they may attempt to conciliate them. If the disruptive group has little political leverage in its own right, as is true of lower-class groups, it will either be ignored or repressed. It is more likely to be ignored when the disrupted institution is not central to the society as a whole, or to other more important groups. Thus if men and women run amok, disrupting the fabric of their own communities, as in the immigrant slums of the nineteenth century, the spectacle may be frightening, but it can be contained within the slums; it will not necessarily have much impact on the society as a whole, or on the well-being of other important groups. Similarly, when impoverished mobs demand relief, they may cause havoc in the relief offices, but chaotic relief offices are not a large problem for the society as a whole, or for important groups. Repression is more likely to be employed when central institutions are affected, as when railroad workers struck and rioted in the late nineteenth century, or

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27 Rosa Luxemburg’s comments are again persuasive: “At the moment that a real, earnest period of mass strikes begins all these ‘calculations of costs’ change into the project of draining the ocean with a water glass. And it is an ocean of frightful privations and sufferings which the proletarian masses buy with every revolution. The solution which a revolutionary period gives to these seemingly invincible difficulties is that along with them such an immense amount of mass idealism is let loose that the masses are insensible to the sharpest sufferings. Neither revolution nor mass strikes can be made with the psychology of a trade unionist who will not cease work on May Day unless he is assured in advance of a determined support in the case of measures being taken against him” (246).
when the police struck in Boston after the First World War. Either way, to be ignored or punished is what the poor ordinarily expect from government, because these are the responses they ordinarily evoke.28

But protest movements do not arise during ordinary periods; they arise when large-scale changes undermine political stability. It is in this context, as we said earlier, that gives the poor hope and makes insurmountable in the first place. It is this context that also makes political leaders somewhat vulnerable to protests by the poor.

At times of rapid economic and social change, political leaders are far less free either to ignore disturbances or to employ punitive measures. At such times, the relationship of political leaders to their constituents is likely to become uncertain.29 This unsettled state of political affairs makes the regime far more sensitive to disturbances, for it is not only more likely that previously uninvolved groups will be activated—the scope of conflict will be widened, in Schattschneider’s terminology—but that the scope of conflict will be widened at a time when political alignments have already become unpredictable.30

When a political leadership becomes unsure of its support, even disturbances that are isolated within peripheral institutions cannot be so safely ignored, for the mere appearance of trouble and disorder is more threatening when political alignments are unstable. And when the disrupted institutions are central to economic production or to the stability of social life, it becomes imperative that normal operations be restored if the regime is to maintain support

28 Disruptions confined within institutions have the characteristics that Schattschneider attributes to small conflicts: “It is one of the qualities of extremely small conflicts that the relative strengths of the contestants are likely to be known in advance. In this case the stronger side may impose its will on the weaker without an overt test of strength because people are not apt to fight if they are sure to lose” (4).

29 Lollis and Tilly, in arguing against the social disorganization perspective, suggest that the amount of collective violence should be related to “the structure of power, the capacity of deprived groups for collective action, the forms of repression employed by the authorities, and the disparities between the weak and the powerful in shared understandings about collective rights to action and to use of valued resources . . . ” (16).

It is our point that each of these factors changes, at least temporarily, during periods of serious and widespread instability. Most importantly, the resources available to the regime decline (16).

30 “To understand any conflict it is necessary, therefore, to keep constantly in mind the relations between the combatants and the audience because the audience is likely to do the kinds of things that determine the outcome of the fight. . . . The stronger contestant may hesitate to use his strength because he does not know whether or not he is going to be able to isolate his antagonist” (5).
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their own survival, to act in ways which aroused the fierce opposition of economic elites. In short, under conditions of severe electoral instability, the alliance of public and private power is sometimes weakened, if only briefly, and at these moments a defiant poor may make gains.  

Second, political leaders or elites allied with them, will try to quiet disturbances not only by dealing with immediate grievances, but by making efforts to channel the energies and anger of the protesters into more legitimate and less disruptive forms of political behavior, in part by offering incentives to movement leaders or, in other words, by co-opting them. Thus relief demonstrators in both the 1930s and the 1960s were encouraged to learn to use administrative grievance procedures as an alternative to merely disrupting relief offices, while their leaders were offered positions as advisors to relief administrators. In the 1960s civil rights organizers left the streets to take jobs in the Great Society programs; and as rioting spread in the northern cities, street leaders in the ghettos were encouraged to join in “dialogues” with municipal officials, and some were offered positions in municipal agencies.

Third, the measures promulgated by government at times of disturbance may be designed not to conciliate the protesters, but to undermine whatever sympathy the protesting group has been able to command from a wider public. Usually this is achieved through new programs that appear to meet the moral demands of the movement, and thus rob it of support without actually yielding much by way of tangible gains. A striking example was the passage of the pension provisions of the Social Security Act. The organized aged in the Townsend Movement were demanding pensions of $200 a month, with no strings attached, and they had managed to induce some 25 million people to sign supporting petitions. As it turned out, the Social Security Act, while it provided a measure of security for many of the future aged, did nothing for the members of the Townsend Movement, none of whom would be covered by a work-related insurance scheme since they were no longer working, and most of whom would in any case be dead when the payments were to begin some seven years later. But the pension provisions of the Social Security Act answered the moral claims of the movement. In principle, government had acted to protect America’s aged, thus severing any identification between those who would be old in the future and those who were already old. The Social Security Act effectively dampened public support for the Townsend Plan while yielding the old people nothing. Other examples of responses which undermine public support abound. The widely heralded federal programs for the ghettos in the 1960s were neither designed nor funded in a way that made it possible for them to have substantial impact on poverty or on the traumas of ghetto life. But the publicity attached to the programs—the din and blare about a “war on poverty” and the development of “model cities”—did much to appease the liberal sympathizers with urban blacks.

Finally, these apparently conciliatory measures make it possible for government to safely employ repressive measures as well. Typically, leaders and groups who are more disruptive, or who spur the concessions offered, are singled out for arbitrary police action or for more formal legal harassment through congressional investigations or through the courts. In the context of much-publicized efforts by government to ease the grievances of disaffected groups, coercive measures of this kind are not likely to arouse indignation among sympathetic publics. Indeed, this dual strategy is useful in another way, for it serves to cast an aura of balance and judiciousness over government action.

The main point, however, is simply that the political impact of institutional disruptions depends upon electoral conditions. Even serious disruptions, such as industrial strikes, will force concessions....

The Structuring of Protest

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only when the calculus of electoral instability favors the protestors. And even then, when the protestors succeed in forcing government to respond, they do not dictate the content of those responses. As to the variety of specific circumstances which determine how much the protestors will gain and how much they will lose, we still have a great deal to learn.

THE DEMISE OF PROTEST

It is not surprising that, taken together, these efforts to conciliate and disarm usually lead to the demise of the protest movement, partly by transforming the movement itself, and partly by transforming the political climate which nourishes protest. With these changes, the array of institutional controls which ordinarily restrain protest is restored, and political influence is once more denied to the lower class.

We said that one form of government response was to make concessions to the protestors, yielding them something of what they demanded, either symbolic or material. But the mere granting of such concessions is probably not very important in accounting for the demise of a movement. For one thing, whatever is yielded is usually modest if not meager; for another, even modest concessions demonstrate that protest "works," a circumstance that might as easily be expected to fuel a movement as to pacify it.

But concessions are rarely unencumbered. If they are given at all, they are usually part and parcel of measures to reintegrate the movement into normal political channels and to absorb its leaders into stable institutional roles. Thus the right of industrial workers to unionize, won in response to massive and disruptive strikes in the 1930s, meant that workers were encouraged to use newly established grievance procedures in place of the sit-down or the wildcat strike; and the new union leaders, now absorbed in relations with factory management and in the councils of the Democratic Party, became part of that strategy of normalcy and moderation. Similarly, when blacks won the vote in the South and a share of patronage in the municipalities of the North in response to the disturbances of the 1960s, black leaders were absorbed into electoral and bureaucratic politics and became the ideological proponents of the shift "from protest to politics" (Rustin).33

This feature of government action deserves some explanation because the main reintegrative measures—the right to organize, the right to vote, black representation in city government—were also responses to specific demands made by the protestors themselves. To all appearances, government simply acted to redress felt grievances. But the process was by no means as straightforward as that. As we suggested earlier, the movements had arisen through interaction with elites, and had been led to make the demands they made in response to early encouragement by political leaders. Nor was it fortuitous that political leaders came to proclaim as just such causes as the right to organize or the right to vote or the right to "citizen participation." In each case, elites responded to discontent by proposing reforms with which they had experience, and which consisted mainly of extending established procedures to new groups or to new institutional arenas. Collective bargaining was not invented in the 1980s, nor the franchise in the 1960s. Driven by turmoil, political leaders proposed reforms that were in a sense prefigured by institutional arrangements that already existed, that were drawn from a repertoire provided by existing traditions. And an aroused people responded by demanding simply what political leaders had said they should have.

If through some accident of history they had done otherwise, if industrial workers had demanded public ownership of factories, they would probably have still gotten unionism, if they got anything at all; and if impoverished southern blacks had demanded land reform, they would probably have still gotten the vote.

At the same time that government makes efforts to re integrate disaffected groups, and to guide them into less politically disturbing forms of behavior, it also moves to isolate them from potential supporters and, by doing so, diminishes the morale of the movement. Finally, while the movement is eroding under these influences, its

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33 James Q. Wilson seems to us to miss the point when he ascribes the demise of SNCC and CORE to "failure and repudiation, and the intolerable strain this exerted on those "redemptive" organizations which required a total transformation of society on the one hand, and extraordinary commitments from their members on the other hand. First, and most important, by no stretch of the reasonable imagination can SNCC and CORE be said to have failed, as we will explain in chapter 4. Second, while some may have been redemptive organizations, their demise was most significantly the result of the impact of government measures on both cadres and constituency. It was government responses that generated factionalism and disillusionment, and not simply "the disillusionment that inevitably affects a redemptive organization" (180-182).
leaders attracted by new opportunities, its followers conciliated, confused, or discouraged, the show of repressive force against recalcitrant elements demolishes the few who are left.

However, the more far-reaching changes do not occur within the movement, but in the political context which nourished the movement in the first place. The agitated and defiant people who compose the movement are but a small proportion of the discontented population on which it draws. Presumably if some leaders were coopted, new leaders would arise; if some participants were apprised or discouraged, others would take their place. But this does not happen, because government’s responses not only destroy the movement, they also transform the political climate which makes protest possible. The concessions to the protesters, the efforts to “bring them into the system,” and in particular the measures aimed at potential supporters, all work to create a powerful image of a benevolent and responsive government that answers grievances and solves problems. As a result, whatever support might have existed among the larger population dwindles. Moreover, the display of government benevolence stimulates antagonist groups, and triggers the antagonistic sentiments of more neutral sectors. The “tide of public opinion” begins to turn—against labor in the late 1930s, against blacks in the late 1960s. And as it does, the definitions put forward by political leaders also change, particularly when prodded by contenders for political office who sense the shift in popular mood, and the weaknesses it reveals in an incumbent’s support. Thus in the late 1960s, Republican leaders took advantage of white resentment against blacks to attract Democratic voters, raising cries of “law and order” and “workfare not welfare”—the code words for racial antagonism. Such a change is ominous. Where once the powerful voices of the land enunciated a rhetoric that gave courage to the poor, now they enunciate a rhetoric that erases hope, and implants fear. The point should be evident that as these various circumstances combine, defiance is no longer possible.

THE RESIDUE OF REFORM

When protest subsides, concessions may be withdrawn. Thus when the unemployed become docile, the relief rolls are cut even though many are still unemployed; when the ghetto becomes quiescent,
evictions are resumed. The reason is simple enough. Since the poor no longer pose the threat of disruption, they no longer exert leverage on political leaders; there is no need for conciliation. This is particularly the case in a climate of growing political hostility, for the concessions granted are likely to become the focus of resentment by other groups.

But some concessions are not withdrawn. As the tide of turbulence recedes, major institutional changes sometimes remain. Thus the right of workers to join unions was not rescinded when turmoil subsided (although some of the rights ceded to unions were withdrawn). And it is not likely that the franchise granted to blacks in the South will be taken back (although just that happened in the post-Reconstruction period). Why, then, are some concessions withdrawn while others become permanent institutional reforms?

The answer, perhaps, is that while some of the reforms granted during periods of turmoil are costly or repugnant to various groups in the society, and are therefore suffered only under duress, other innovations turn out to be compatible (or at least not incompatible) with the interests of more powerful groups, most importantly with the interests of dominant economic groups. Such an assertion has the aura of a conspiracy theory, but in fact the process is not conspiratorial at all. Major industrialists had resisted unionization, but once forced to concede it as the price of industrial peace, they gradually discovered that labor unions constituted a useful mechanism to regulate the labor force. The problem of disciplining industrial labor had been developing over the course of a century. The depression produced the political turmoil through which a solution was forged. Nor was the solution simply snatched from the air. As noted earlier, collective bargaining was a tried and tested method of dealing with labor disturbances. The tumult of the 1930s made the use of this method imperative; once implemented, the reforms were institutionalized because they continued to prove useful.

Similarly, southern economic elites had no interest in ceding southern blacks the franchise. But their stakes in disfranchising blacks had diminished. The old plantation economy was losing ground to new industrial enterprises; plantation-based elites were losing ground to economic dominants based in industry. The feudal political arrangements on which a plantation economy had relied were no longer of central importance, and certainly they were not of central importance to the new economic elites. Black uprisings, by forcing the extension of the franchise and the modernization of
southern politics, thus helped seal a fissure in the institutional fabric of American society, a fissure resulting from the growing inconsistency between the economic and political institutions of the South.

What these examples suggest is that protest wins if they win at all, what historical circumstances have already made ready to be conceded. Still, as Alan Wolfe has said, governments do not change magically through some “historical radical transformation,” but only through the actual struggles of the time (154). When people are finally roused to protest against great odds, they take the only options available to them within the limits imposed by their social circumstances. Those who refuse to recognize these limits not only blindly consign lower-class protests to the realm of the semirevolutionary, but also blindly continue to pretend that other, more regular options for political influence are widely available in the American political system.

A Note on the Role of Protest Leadership

The main point of this chapter is that both the limitations and opportunities for mass protest are shaped by social conditions. The implications for the role of leadership in protest movements can be briefly summarized.

Protest wells up in response to momentous changes in the institutional order. It is not created by organizers and leaders.

Once protest erupts, the specific forms it takes are largely determined by features of social structure. Organizers and leaders who contrive strategies that ignore the social location of the people they seek to mobilize can only fail.

Elites respond to the institutional disruptions that protest causes, as well as to other powerful institutional imperatives. Elite responses are not significantly shaped by the demands of leaders and organizers. Nor are elite responses significantly shaped by formally structured organizations of the poor. Whatever influence lower-class groups occasionally exert in American politics does not result from organization, but from mass protest and the disruptive consequences of protest.

Finally, protest in the United States has been episodic and transient, for as it gains momentum, so too do various forms of institutional accommodation and coercion that have the effect of restoring quiescence. Organizers and leaders cannot prevent the ebbing of protest, nor the erosion of whatever influence protest yielded the lower class. They can only try to win whatever can be won while it can be won.

In these major ways protest movements are shaped by institutional conditions, and not by the purposive efforts of leaders and organizers. The limitations are large and unyielding. Yet within the boundaries created by these limitations, some latitude for purposive effort remains. Organizers and leaders choose to do one thing, or they choose to do another, and what they choose to do affects to some degree the course of the protest movement. If the area of latitude is less than leaders and organizers would prefer, it is also not enlarged when they proceed as if institutional limitations did not in fact exist by undertaking strategies which fly in the face of these constraints. The wiser course is to understand these limitations, and to exploit whatever latitude remains to enlarge the potential influence of the lower class. And if our conclusions are correct, what this means is that strategies must be pursued that escalate the momentum and impact of disruptive protest at each stage in its emergence and evolution.

With these propositions in mind, we now turn to an analysis of recent protest movements.

References


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CHAPTER 2

The Unemployed Workers’ Movement

The depression movements of the unemployed and of industrial workers followed a period of economic breakdown that produced distress and confusion in the daily lives of millions of people, and produced contradiction and confusion in the posture of elites. For those still working, the discontents released by economic collapse during the 1930s were expressed in struggles within the factory system, which we will turn to in the next chapter. But the men and women for whom life had changed most drastically and immediately were no longer in the factories. They were among the masses of the unemployed, and their struggle had to take another form, in another institutional context. The depression saw the rise and fall of the largest movement of the unemployed this country has known, and the institution against which the movement was inevitably pitted was the relief system.

At the time of the Great Depression, formal arrangements for relief of the indigent were sparse and fragmented. In many places, including New York City and Philadelphia, there simply was no “outdoor” relief (the term used to describe aid given to people who were not institutionalized). Even where public relief agencies existed, what little was actually given was usually provided by private charities. But niggardly aid and fragmented administration did not signify an underdeveloped institution. To the contrary, a national relief system did exist. Despite the diversity of administrative auspices, the norms that guided the giving of relief were everywhere quite similar. The dole was anathema to the American spirit of work and self-sufficiency. Therefore, it should be dispensed to as few as pos-