THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN FOSTERING SOUNDER PUBLIC JUDGMENT

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A Sounder Public Judgment Working Paper

PREFACE

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In our age of endemic mistrust, fake news, extreme rhetoric and technology-enhanced manipulation of public opinion, it is increasingly difficult for the public to come to terms with issues in meaningful ways. Public Agenda's Sounder Public Judgment Initiative brings fresh thinking to this profound challenge facing our democracy.

The concept of "public judgment," in contrast to raw, reactive and unstable "opinion," derives from the work of Public Agenda co-founder Dan Yankelovich, a pioneer of public opinion research in America. Rather than a particular point of view or ideology, the term is meant to connote that people have thought and felt their way forward on an issue in a reasonably well-rounded, fair-minded way. It is a stage of public thinking at which people having moved beyond simplistic magic answers and developed relatively responsible, stable positions that take into account the tradeoffs inevitably embedded in thorny public problems.

The conditions that support the formation of public judgment have to change with the way information, communications and persuasion change. They do not appear magically, they must be created and, at times, fought for and defended. These papers, by leading thinkers and practitioners across a variety of relevant fields, are intended to help us do precisely that. The current paper, "The Role of Social Movements in Fostering Sounder Public Judgment," explores the important role social movements can play in helping society come to sounder public judgment and how to help them do so.

PUBLIC AGENDA

INTRODUCTION

Imagine you are the president of a university, the mayor of a city, the editor of a daily newspaper, or the CEO of a community foundation. You may believe a good leader in your position "helps to shape public judgment."[1]

If you are a university president, for example, you may believe the institution exists to support the robust consideration of issues (scholarly, aesthetic, ethical, political, and otherwise) from diverse perspectives. You want individual students and faculty to learn and the whole community to become wiser. The same is true of the newspaper editor who ensures fair coverage of many opinions and types of people and issues.

These leaders have reasons to strive for impartiality. But you may instead be the chair of the board of a for-profit company, the speaker of a legislative body, or the president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. In those cases, it is more widely accepted that you will promote an agenda of your own. Still, like the leaders mentioned in the first paragraph, you are responsible for organizing a discussion that transforms multiple views into considered judgments. Again, these decisions will be wiser if diverse opinions are given fair consideration.

Now along comes a social movement. According to Charles Tilly, a major scholar of contentious politics, one criterion of a social movement is that it make "collective claims on target authorities."[2] A movement may confront *you* with demands, or its claims may affect you in indirect ways. A movement to end a war, for instance, may not make demands of a university, but it may turn the campus into a venue for protests that are aimed (ultimately) at the government.

As a leader who seeks to promote public judgment, you may welcome this social movement for putting important issues on the agenda. You may agree with its demands. Or you may consider it a threat, either because you don't share its goals or because its style of engagement (making demands and backing them with forms of pressure, such as protests or sit-ins) conflicts with your institutional values of impartiality, diversity of viewpoints, civility, and so on.

Regardless of your opinion of it, you are likely to see the social movement as different *in kind* from the organization you lead. You are a steward of an entity with a bank account, a board, and a mission statement. Your role is to help stakeholders govern this organization wisely. The social movement may appear to you mainly in the guise of *individuals* who participate in *events* or *episodes*: protesters, boycotters, strikers, voters. You may tend to think of movements as comprising people who share the same beliefs or goals. You may notice that many of your students have become environmentalists, for example, or antiracists or neofascists. To you, they are a movement.

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[1] Daniel Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in Complex World* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 243.
[2] Charles Tilly, *Social Movements: 1768–2004* (Boulder/London: Paradigm, 2004), 7.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AS SOURCES OF DELIBERATION AND JUDGMENT

I want to encourage a different view. Any "movement" worthy of that label persists over multiple events and episodes.[3] It recruits active members and supporters and collects resources, which it uses in more or less strategic ways. Its members may not agree about anything in particular, not even the movement's marquee slogans. Ziad Munson has found that many anti-abortion protesters do not start with strong opinions about that issue but are recruited into activist networks, from which they derive their anti-abortion views as they act.[4] "Opponents of abortion" is the label for a segment of the population that can be identified with a survey that asks opinion questions. The Pro-Life Movement, on the other hand, is a social entity, with resources and membership that persist over time; some of its members are not even against abortion. This is typical of movements in general.

Once you distinguish between individuals (activists, radicals, protesters) and a movement, you will notice that the movement resembles your own organization in some respects. It may encompass several autonomous components, but it still constitutes a larger whole with a real presence. The Civil Rights Movement in the United States, for example, encompassed among its entities many churches networked together in organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Council, classic membership associations like the NAACP and the Urban League, a political party (the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party), and a union (the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters), but we can still tell the movement's history and describe its central tenets and tendencies at each point in the story.

As complex structures built of organizations and people, social movements can contribute to public judgment in society in at least three ways.

First, like a healthy organization, a movement encompasses many people who disagree among themselves and who discuss their disagreements in an effort to come to judgment. In fact, some of the most robust, diverse, and generative discussions in American history have taken place *within* abolitionist, populist, labor, peace, feminist, and civil rights movements. As these conversations spill beyond their own movements' borders, they prompt more people to consider the issue in fresh ways.

Second, social movements have a long tradition of providing "Free Spaces," forums in which their members discuss and learn.[5] They have frequently developed new types of forums, and these innovations have spread. Examples include Grange Halls in Populism, Freedom Schools in the Civil Rights Movement, Talk-Ins against the Vietnam War, consciousness-raising circles in Second-Wave Feminism, novel uses of the online service Meetup by the Tea Party, the "human microphones" of the Occupy Wall Street movement, and the use of hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo to organize conversations online.

Third, social movements have often compelled public discussion of issues that would otherwise be ignored or suppressed. One of the main ways to expand the agenda of discussion within a formal organization is to confront it with a social movement. The great theorist of deliberative democracy,

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[3] Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[4] Ziad W. Munson, *The Making of Pro-Life Activists: How Social Movement Mobilization Works* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[5] Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte, *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

Jürgen Habermas, is often stereotyped as a proponent of calm, rational, facilitated deliberations, but he actually had little to say about deliberative forums. He was, instead, a strong proponent of social movements.[6] His two-volume magnum opus, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, ends with an argument that deliberative democracy depends on social movements to compel attention to issues.[7] Much better known is Dr. Martin Luther King's remark that "we who engage in non-violent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out into the open where it can be seen and dealt with."[8]

SPUD: SCALE, PLURALISM, UNITY, DEPTH

The degree to which a social movement contributes to broader public judgment in society depends on how it is organized and led. These features affect its odds of succeeding at attaining its own goals and its influence on the conversation in the society as a whole. Just as the policies of a university regarding hiring, admissions, tenure, and freedom of speech influence the discussions the university generates, so the structure and norms of a social movement influence both its internal conversations and its impact on outsiders.

My reading of the literature on social movements suggests these features are valuable:

1 **SCALE:** A movement must attract many participants to succeed. Movements with more members are more likely to change a society.[9] In fact, according to Erica Chenoweth, no nonviolent social movement that has attracted the active participation of 3.5 percent or more of a national population has ever failed. [10]

2 **PLURALISM:** A movement is much more likely to succeed if it attracts a diversity of people and organizations who contribute a variety of tactics, specific goals, values, allies, and resources. [11]

3 **UNITY:** A movement must be able to come together to demonstrate a common goal at key moments, or else it cannot make demands on target authorities or negotiate outcomes. [12]

4 **DEPTH:** A movement must change the people who participate, making them more committed, more skillful, and better informed. King observed, "Human beings with all their faults and strengths constitute the mechanism of a social movement. They must make mistakes and learn from them, make more mistakes and learn anew. They must taste defeat as well as success, and discover how to live with each. Time and action are the teachers." [13]

6   Peter Levine, "Habermas with a Whiff of Tear Gas: Nonviolent Campaigns and Deliberation in an Era of Authoritarianism," *Journal of Public Deliberation* 14, no. 2 (2018): 4.

7   Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action* 2 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

8   Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 73.

9   Tilly, *Social Movements*; Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

10 Erica Chenoweth, "My Talk at TEDxBoulder: Civil Resistance and the '3.5% Rule,'" *Rational Insurgent* (November 4, 2013).

11 Chenoweth and Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*; Marshall Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins: Leadership, Organization, and Strategy in the California Farm Worker Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

12 Tilly, *Social Movements*; Chenoweth and Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*.

13 Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait.* (New York, Harper & Row, 1963), 34–5.

Unfortunately, these goals conflict. The tension between pluralism and unity is evident: the more people disagree, the harder it is to present a unified front. It is also hard to accomplish scale along with depth. The kinds of experiences that cause growth and learning cannot be easily provided to large numbers of people. Scott Reed, who leads the community-organizing network known as PICO, described to me how PICO's grassroots leaders develop, spiritually and politically. But "scale is what we are trying to figure out," he said. "How do you get to scale, because we are nowhere near where we want?" Meanwhile, Anna Galland, who leads the online network, Move-On, told me her organization has "tremendous scale and little depth."

If we put these two tensions in one diagram, we get the result displayed in figure 1. This image can serve diagnostic purposes. Any social entity that wishes to coordinate voluntary efforts to change the world is better off occupying as much of this space as possible.

Figure 1. SPUD (Scale, Pluralism, Unity, Depth)
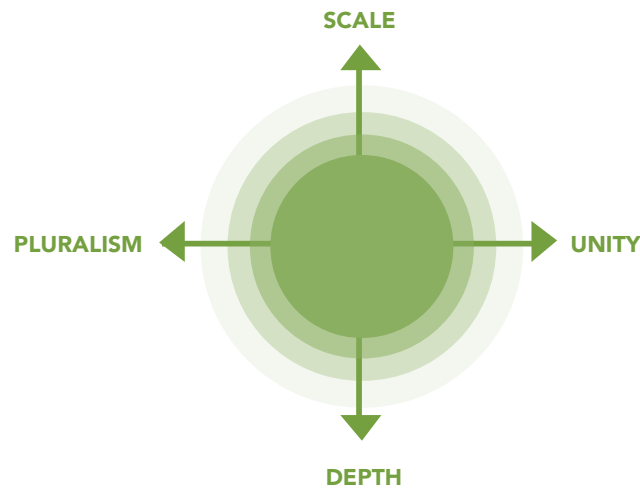
For example, a newspaper seeks to maximize its subscriptions (Scale); it promises diversity (Pluralism) and a coherent vision of the news as embodied by its front-page headlines (Unity); and it has an educational mission (Depth). A university may not want to become as large as possible (Scale), but it must fill its seats, and higher education as a whole must serve about 20 million students. The university provides challenging learning opportunities (Depth); it encompasses diversity of demographics, viewpoints, disciplines, and subjects (Pluralism); but it also tries to set a common standard of academic excellence (Unity). A world-famous example of success, at least considered over the long term, is the Catholic Church, with its 1.2 billion adherents (Scale); saints (Depth); many different holy orders and theological traditions (Pluralism); and one pope and catechism (Unity).

Use of this diagnostic tool would reveal, I think, that the U.S. Civil Rights Movement was a highly impressive example of SPUD from around 1954 to 1966, but its impact diminished once it was no longer able to combine Pluralism with Unity. Today's social movements certainly offer some SPUD, but arguably not enough to be fully successful. When movements are accused of superficiality— attracting mere "clicktivists" instead of committed activists—they are being charged with a lack of Depth. When veteran activists and long-suffering victims of injustice resent casual supporters and would-be "saviors," that demonstrates a conflict between Depth and Scale. When movements begin to impose tests of ideological purity, they sacrifice Pluralism for Unity. But when they simply

aggregate lists of demands without achieving a coherent vision, they gain Pluralism at the expense of Unity.

Achieving SPUD is hard. The tensions are real, and they can erupt with emotional intensity in the form of quarrels between radical and moderates, insiders and outsiders, victims and allies. Or a movement may sweep its disagreements under the rug with disastrous consequences later. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 began as truly diverse, encompassing religious revolutionaries, secular Marxists, merchants hoping for economic liberalization, civil libertarians, and even a hippie drug counterculture. To achieve unity along with all that pluralism, the movement settled on the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as a leader, not because all agreed with his positions but because he seemed uniquely viable as an alternative to the Shah. In fact, there wasn't much discussion within the revolution itself about what Iran should look like after the government fell. This weakness proved fatal once the Shah was deposed, the Ayatollah gained power, and he and his allies ruthlessly destroyed all internal opposition.[14] This revolution was a case of too much Scale and Unity achieved with too little discussion. Its failure just reinforced the need to accomplish SPUD and to do so with explicit conversation and reflection.

MOVEMENTS TODAY

Comparing the social movements of the 1950s through the 1970s with those of today is risky because both have encompassed much diversity, and it is too early to know how the movements of our time will develop. They are clearly learning and changing. Still, the looser structure of many contemporary movements may reduce their capacity to reach public judgments internally.

In traditional movements, a core problem is to motivate many people to take action for the same purpose at the same time. This is what economists call "the problem of collective action." In a case like the Civil Rights Movement, most participants already belonged to groups (churches, unions, student associations, and the like) that were capable of organizing their own members' action. To coordinate at a larger scale, these organizations' leaders met and talked to develop strategies and messages that could appeal to the whole grassroots base of the movement. As they did so, leadership committees could consider new events, criticisms, and competitors and revise their views. A classic example is the conference held at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee in 1961 to deliberate a divisive choice between voter registration and mass civil disobedience.

Some contemporary movements, powered by digital media, grow *without* having to deliberate and refine their positions to motivate collective action by their members. Instead, individuals link

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[14] Chenoweth and Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works.*

voluntarily to relatively likeminded peers, who agglomerate into larger networks that are loosely connected by hashtags or other slogans and symbols. Bennett and Segerberg have called this the "logic of connective action," in contrast to the traditional "logic of collective action." Their main case was *los indignados*, a Spanish reform movement that mobilized some 15 million citizens in 2011, whose impressive growth they described in their 2013 book.[15] Subsequently, some of *los indignados* coalesced into a political party, Podemos, that developed a policy platform disliked by many of the original participants. The original social movement had been plural, but its demands were vague, and it lacked a mechanism for addressing disagreements. Podemos was unified and disciplined, but it alienated many in the movement from which it had sprung. As a result, *los indignados* appears to have died not long after its birth.

Another worrying case was the Kony 2012 campaign, which grew to large scale when millions of people saw a video attacking the Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony. Their movement collapsed when its core message received valid criticisms, ranging from disagreements about the root causes of the violence to simple but important factual challenges (for example, Kony had actually left Uganda). In the face of the criticism, the movement hemorrhaged members.

The broader question is whether movements built from decentralized networks can handle disagreements, since they don't have leadership teams that can deliberate and reach new judgments in the face of new events and ideas, which can then spread to the larger body of participants and possibly to the broader population. The advantages of fluidity and accessibility should not be overlooked, but I am worried about the capacity of at least some current movements to achieve and then revise public judgment internally. On the whole, I think social media are more of a threat than a resource for addressing that problem.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

For people concerned with wise public judgment, the SPUD concept has several implications.

First, social movements should strive to be relatively deliberative. It takes talk—difficult, sometimes wrenching talk—to combine Scale with Depth and Unity with Pluralism. Marshall Ganz wrote,

> Leadership teams [of social movements] that conduct regular, open, and authoritative deliberation have more strategic capacity than those that do not . . . [They] enhance their strategic capacity because they acquire access to salient information, participate in a creative process, . . . and are motivated by commitment to choices they participated in making . . . And deliberation open to heterogenous points of view—or "deviant perspectives"—facilitates better decisions.[16]

The "leadership team" of a social movement may not be defined as formally as it would be in an incorporated organization. It may be a porous network. Nevertheless, teamwork is essential, and deliberations must be "authoritative" in the sense that they result in collective action. As Ganz suggested, this means deliberative skills and values are crucial resources for social movements.

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15 W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra S. Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

16 Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins*, 190.

In contrast to civic institutions that are committed to impartiality (such as schools, universities, or newspapers), a social movement should hold a core agenda for change, and it is entitled to have a demographic or ideological base. The Civil Rights Movement was not a representative deliberation of all Americans. It was black-led, and it was committed to racial equity, nonviolence, and democracy. People who opposed those values were not welcome in the movement. The "regular, open, and authoritative deliberation[s]" of its leaders, however—who included radicals and moderates, clergy and labor organizers, youth and elders—were essential for maintaining its discipline, flexibility, and wisdom.

Second, organizations that are explicitly devoted to deliberation, dialogue, civil discourse, and related concepts have value for social movements. At least some teachers and schools, for example, aim to teach deliberative skills and values to their students.[17] Although public school teachers must strive for a degree of impartiality, they can teach their students to deliberate, thereby developing civic skills and values useful in movements.

Nancy Thomas and Adam Gismondi advised college administrators who are confronted with student activism, "Don't let students go down some rabbit hole of alternative facts or myopic analysis. Insist that students answer questions, like what do we know about this issue? Is what we know reliable? How will we fill knowledge gaps? And most importantly, what are all of the perspectives on this issue, including unpopular ones unrepresented in this group?"[18] Tension may exist between these academic-sounding values and the political objectives of a movement, but this tension is helpful. When things go well, an educational institution, like a school or a college, a news source, a museum, or a civic association, can improve a social movement by calling it back to inquiry and reflection.

Third, everyone should be conscious of social movements as entities with structures, assets, norms, and resources. The question is not (merely), what political opinions do you hold and with which categories of citizens do you agree? You should also ask what you think of the social movements of the day. Are they drawing diverse people together for generative conversations? Are they inventing new forms of political action that are valuable? Alinelinerms and habits that damage their members or other people? Do they tend toward extremism, nihilism, cynicism, a cult of personality, groupthink, or other pathologies? How good are they at SPUD?

A movement can be worthy of support even if you disagree in part with its current agenda if it provides a forum for learning, growth, and solidarity. Or you might find you agree with every demand of a social movement but choose to avoid it because of its internal dynamics. The point is to pay attention to the movement, not just the claims it makes at the moment.

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[17] Diana E. Hess and Paula McAvoy, *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

[18] Nancy Thomas and Adam Gismondi, "A New Era of Student Unrest?" *Inside Higher Ed* (February 7, 2017), https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2017/02/07/do-recent-student- demonstrations-signal-new-trend-activism-essay.

CONCLUSION

Deliberative values belong on the list of values any fair and wise community develops. We should govern ourselves deliberatively.

The hard question is why major institutions would ever promote deliberative values instead of undermining them in their own interests. Albert Dzur has asked, "Who will spark public deliberation, where will it take place, [and] how will the strong counter deliberative forces in American political life be kept at bay?"[19]

At first glance, social movements do not sound helpful. They are not centrally concerned with deliberation but, rather, make demands on "target authorities"[20] and back their claims with forms of pressure, such as protests, boycotts, occupations, and strikes. They sound like part of the problem rather than the solution. But I have assembled evidence that social movements promote internal discussions, invent new formats for discussions, and compel valuable discussions in the society as a whole. They are a source of political energy, arising constantly and relatively spontaneously in twenty-first century societies. They are more likely to succeed to the degree that they manage their own tensions and disagreements deliberatively. Therefore, making social movements more deliberative is a promising strategy for strengthening public judgment. ■

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[19] Albert W. Dzur, *Democratic Professionalism: Citizen Participation and the Reconstruction of Professional Ethics, Identity, and Practice* (State College: Penn State Press, 2008), 77.
[20] Tilly, *Social Movements*.