Abstract

Subverting Our Stories of Subversion

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Three theoretical moves or themes have gained attention in the emerging literature at the intersection of social movements, institutions, and organizations. We have contributed to each of these three themes, showing them to be inter-related, in our previous work that draws on the case of the adoption of gay-friendly policies by organizations:

1. The construction of social identities as the basis for social movement mobilization by active agents. (We found that everyday encounters in which agents share and thereby mold both the distinct and prosaic elements of an identity help to legitimate that identity (Creed and Scully, 2000).)

2. The creation – and we would add, diffusion – of repertoires of action by these agents. (We found that not only did domestic partner benefits partially diffuse among organizations in a field, but the activists’ tactics, such as “stealth legitimation,” diffused as well, enabling some organizations to be deeply involved in the issues even if they were not yet adopters; the adoption / non-adoption distinction becomes a less crucial outcome than the mobilization of ready agents and tactics (Scully, Creed, and Ventresca, 1999).)

3. The appreciation of symbolic resources (e.g., discourse, framing) as tools for action. (We found frames from the political realm are in some ways adopted wholesale and in some ways translated and manipulated by agents pursuing change in local workplace settings (Creed, Scully, and Austin, forthcoming).)

Together, these three themes begin to build a new narrative of how social movements are carried forward by grassroots organizational members. In this chapter, we push on these concepts, examining both their explanatory usefulness – with particular attention to what is left out or obscured – as well as their implications for the prospects for success of social movements. Pushing harder on our own work is in the spirit of what Hirschman (1995:1) calls “the propensity to self-subversion,” which he describes as “questioning, modifying, qualifying, and in general complicating some of my earlier propositions about social change and development.” We find it fitting that theorizing about subversion of the status quo – even about the fairly subtle subversions of activists in the workplace – should take this reflexively subversive approach (Scully, 2002).

We revisit each of the three themes and find dilemmas in how we have posed each of them. Regarding the first theme, the creation, legitimation, and celebration of strong identities can mobilize activists. But the dilemma is that these strong identities can also be enacted through the drawing of narrow boundaries around a group identity. These narrow boundaries may have several problems: they may diminish the prospects
for cross-group understanding if activists are too busy proclaiming to listen, they may thereby diminish the prospects for alliance-building among likely allies with shared concerns who get divided into narrow identity silos, and they may make it difficult for people whose identities span or do not fit these groups to find a place for their claims.

Regarding the second theme, the creation and diffusion of repertoires of action reveals the important role that pro-active (not merely scripted or reactive) agents play in social change programs. This perspective corrects earlier tendencies in institutional theory to posit a naïve agent with nearly automatic responses. However, the pendulum can swing too far toward an account of agents making completely new repertoires. A close look at the strategies of change agents who seek to enhance diversity in the workplace reveals that they are patterned across settings, and specifically, they are strongly influenced by the repertoires of action that govern business: they hold meetings, use flip charts, create an email distribution list, write up a mission statement, pursue sub-goals, form subcommittees, prepare power point presentations with bullet points, court senior allies, etc. The insights of institutional theory, combined with a power-oriented perspective on the dominance of the business way of doing things, are helpful here for assessing the hallmark elements of micromobilization.

Regarding the third theme, symbolic resources such as discourse are important inputs into social movement mobilization. Sometimes they are outcomes as well; for example, new language enhances the sense of inclusion of formerly marginalized groups. But the dilemma is that other, more material outcomes, such as the redistribution of wealth, should not be overlooked. Symbolic resources have previously tended to be under-estimated. They have the special property – that Hirschmann ascribes to “moral resources” – that they are increased through use, rather than depleted through use (and in fact, they are depleted when not used – such as, for example, social capital or civic involvement). We have argued for the importance of considering symbolic resources. That said, it can become temptingly easy to place the focus on symbolic resources. The literature and practice of social movements, in its shift toward identity politics, may be losing sight of interests and of the hard-boiled economic resources that pose distributive dilemmas (resources that are, by way of contrast, what Elster calls non-partitive, scarce, etc). In the shift away from class, labor, or economically based politics toward identity politics, redistributive issues can be lost. There seems to be less willingness in social identity based politics to tackle the redistributive issues that are often at the heart of social justice and the most difficult public policy debates. A focus on social identity often seeks to enhance inclusion and belonging – moral resources that are not finite and that can be expansively applied to all in a way that enriches social life for all. But where is the concern about the growing wage gap? about poverty? Identity politics will have more power when more of the marginalized identity groups that might be mobilized—e.g., former welfare recipients who have lost jobs – are enabled, by naming and speaking their identity, to advance material interests, not just to be heard and accepted. A true study of subversion should not shy away from thorny issues of redistribution.