Commitment and Agency in Social Movements

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Any movement that hopes to sustain commitment over a period of time must make the construction of a collective identity one of its most central tasks. Social relationships that embody values of participation and community in their concrete practices contribute to empowering people. But such arguments need additional specification before their theoretical potential can be realized. I have taken the coincidence of this talk with the anniversary of the first teach-in against the war in Vietnam and the assassination of Archbishop Romero in El Salvador as a directive for examining these two cases—with an eye toward learning more about how identity building and social relationships in social movement practice foster long-term commitment and agency.

KEY WORDS: agency; commitment; collective identity; participation; base communities; teach-ins.

INTRODUCTION

Suddenly last summer I stumbled on the fact that the occasion for this talk fell on March 24, 1990. March 24 is a date of some historical significance. Ten years ago, on this day, a gunman walked into the chapel of the San Salvador Cathedral where Archbishop Oscar Romero was saying mass and shot him. Twenty-five years ago, a group of faculty and students at the University of Michigan staged the first teach-in against the war in Vietnam.

As a participant in the movements against U.S. Military intervention in both Vietnam and El Salvador, I was already aware of the coincidence of dates between the Romero assassination and the first teach-in. The latter
event has a special personal significance because I was not merely a participant but, in fact, a central actor in bringing it about. I have written often about social movements in the ensuing 25 years but for various reasons, some of which I may not be fully aware of, I have never written of these events that were so central to me personally.

Of course there are enormous differences between the movement of peasants and workers in El Salvador in the 1970s and the anti-Vietnam War movement in the United States. No one would have called faculty at the University of Michigan an oppressed group. The different social location of the participants had dramatic effects on their sense of agency and empowerment. Every collective action process started at a radically different point in the two situations.

Yet each succeeded in winning many adherents with intense commitments that were maintained over a period of several years; each instilled in people a sense that by acting together they could alter the broader policies and structures that influenced their lives. It is all the more striking, then, if we can find common elements in the processes by which each movement built commitment and a sense of agency among their participants.

We can learn from both of these cases about the construction of a "movement" collective identity and about the quality of social relationships and risk sharing that contribute to commitment and agency. Any movement that hopes to sustain commitment over a period of time must make the construction of a collective identity one of its most central tasks. Social relationships that embody values of participation and community in their concrete practices contribute to empowering people. But such arguments are badly in need of additional specification before their theoretical potential can be realized. I have taken the anniversary coincidence as a directive for examining these two cases—with an eye toward learning more about how identity building and social relationships in social movement practice foster long-term commitment and agency.

THE FIRST TEACH-IN

March 24, 1965, was a bitter cold, wintery night in Ann Arbor, Michigan, but I remember the euphoria and the enormous energy. The teach-in was the culmination of two turbulent weeks. A bit of historical context is necessary to understand them.

In February 1965, Lyndon Johnson's administration began the full-scale escalation of the Vietnam War that ultimately led to introduction of more than half a million U.S. combat troops. It began with the regular bombing of North Vietnam to repel what a State Department "White
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Paper” labeled an “Invasion from the North.” Vietnam had been briefly salient in the mass media during the 1964 presidential campaign when the United States had bombed North Vietnam in what was claimed to be retaliation for an “unprovoked attack” on American warships in the Gulf of Tonkin. Subsequently, it had receded to the back pages or dropped out of the media spotlight completely.

On the evening of March 11, a group of some 20 faculty met at the home of one of them to consider what action might be taken to oppose U.S. intervention in Vietnam. Part of the group proposed a newspaper advertisement urging the Johnson administration to end its intervention. I was one among several people who had already signed a New York Times ad published the previous December and I had given some prior thought to a more dramatic alternative.

My proposal was based on the model of the Freedom School protests I had witnessed in Boston as a participant in the civil rights movement in the early 1960s. It combined a protest action—a boycott of the public schools on a given day—with a constructive program, using the day to teach students aspects of black history and what was currently happening in the civil rights struggle in the South.

I proposed something similar for our action: to call off classes for one day to focus all of our attention on what was happening in Vietnam. Not everyone felt ready to consider this action and, by agreement, the meeting broke up into two amicable subgroups. One would work on the planned advertisement and the other would move into another room to work on the plan to call off classes.

We decided to call our action a “moratorium” rather than a strike to emphasize that we were not protesting against the university, but against U.S. foreign policy and to emphasize the positive nature of what we intended to substitute for our classes on that day. With a nucleus from the meeting and a few additions recruited the next day, we had 13 signatories pledged to participate in “Vietnam Day” on March 24 in lieu of classes. On Saturday, we released a statement to a friendly reporter on The Michigan Daily, the widely read student newspaper. Not unexpectedly, we soon found ourselves at the center of a storm.

Within the university, the public reaction was comparatively low key. University President Harlan Hatcher was quoted as saying, “There is a time and place for making protests, but dismissing classes is certainly not an acceptable one.” The Detroit papers picked up the story and the statewide reaction was less restrained. “California U. Spector Hovers,” headlined the Detroit News, “as Senators Rap U-M Rebels.”

By Tuesday, we had been condemned by the governor, and the state legislature passed a resolution urging President Hatcher to take disciplinary
action if the plan went ahead, with most of the hour-long debate centering on those parts of the resolution calling the action “unlawful” and “un-American.” Ultimately, these terms were deleted and the resolution passed without them. Several senators complained that the resolution was too weak. “I was hoping to condemn them and ask President Hatcher to fire them,” one legislator complained. Governor George Romney termed the moratorium “about the worst type of example professors could give to their students.”

As the group’s spokesperson, I quickly developed a media line: yes, we were still planning to go ahead in spite of criticism by university officials and others; our protest was not directed at them, and we would call it off if the Johnson administration announced it would stop bombing North Vietnam and negotiate an American withdrawal; no, we did not think we were giving aid and comfort to the enemies of America, but trying to save America from its government’s follies; no, we did not think we were being irresponsible by calling off our classes but were meeting a higher responsibility to students by turning aside from business as usual to educate them about Vietnam.

Meanwhile, our number continued to grow as additional faculty members and teaching fellows called up to express their interest and support. At the first meeting, I had agreed to host our next meeting at my house on Monday evening, March 15, to plan the details of our alternative program on March 24th. The living room was packed. Several people, emphasizing their shared outrage about what was happening in Vietnam, expressed their misgivings about the moratorium.

I was wary about being diverted and, using my position as chair, asked the people who did not like the moratorium to move to the next room to consider alternatives while those of us who supported it could work on its implementation. None took this option and the meeting ended with some preliminary plans and a good deal of frustration on the part of many participants. Many, however, added their names to the list of participants in spite of their considerable misgivings, an act that I noted and appreciated. By midweek, we were up to 46 participants including mostly faculty but some teaching fellows as well.

As the controversy continued to grow, those with misgivings began to develop an alternative. Under their prodding, I agreed to another meeting to be held on Wednesday evening to consider their proposal. I insisted on one condition to which they readily agreed: the meeting should be limited to those who had committed themselves to the moratorium proposal and were themselves on the line. I did not articulate it at the time but my implicit rule for democratic decision making was that only “we” could decide to make a change, and one became part of this “we” by joining
those of us already out on the limb. In this collectivity under attack, one earned a voice by expressing solidarity through shared risk taking.

The Wednesday evening meeting was held at the house of a psychologist, William Livant, who had been part of the original moratorium group from the beginning. Two anthropologists, Marshall Sahlins and Eric Wolf, and a philosopher, Arnold Kaufman, were spokespersons for the alternative plan. When I arrived at Livant’s house, I discovered that there were three representatives of the executive committee of the faculty senate present along with a sympathetic reporter from The Michigan Daily. I was upset at the violation of the ground rules.

I began chairing the meeting by explaining to the faculty senate members that many people had asked to attend the meeting but had been told that it was only for the 46 people who had publicly committed themselves to the moratorium idea. It would be unfair, I insisted, to allow them to stay. They countered that they only wished to be friendly observers and to listen to the discussion, not participate. A short discussion ensued, which was ended when one of the spokespersons for the alternative plan said to them, “Gentlemen, you will only hurt your own cause by staying. Please leave.” They then left amidst our assurances that they would be informed the next day about what was decided. The Michigan Daily reporter, to his chagrin, was ushered out as well. Only “we” were left.

At this point, I asked that someone else chair the meeting so that I could be free to participate in the discussion. Wolf presented the alternative plan but began with a crucial statement: if we decided collectively to stick with the original moratorium idea rather than switch to the proposed alternative, they would fully support the moratorium in spite of their misgivings. After the initial presentation, someone suggested that we go around the room, allowing each person to express his or her thoughts and feelings. With 46 people, this was bound to take some time but, to my recollection, no one objected to this procedure. In the context of shared risks, it seemed entirely appropriate.

The alternative plan, which the proposers named a “teach-in,” called for a 24-hour session, beginning during the day and continuing through the night. The term “teach-in” was perfect symbolism—by linking the action rhetorically with the lunch counter “sit-ins” of the civil rights movement, its meaning as an act of protest remained clear. The “teach” part emphasized the constructive component of the alternative activity.

I vividly remember many of the comments. One of my colleagues in sociology who was then a new assistant professor said, “I’m in favor of the alternative but it’s not because I think it is more or less effective as a protest against the Vietnam War. It’s because I’m scared. I’m afraid of losing my job. I could repeat some of the arguments for switching that
others have given, but that’s the real reason.” Most of the other comments focused on the merits and demerits of the proposals, but contained a good bit of soul-searching as well.

I spoke early, attempting to make the case for the moratorium. I argued that something crucial would be lost if everyone went about business as usual instead of making the Vietnam War their business that day. But I had no real answer to a central objection being raised by the opposition: the moratorium plan was making the issue of whether or not professors could call off classes the focus of controversy and pushing the Vietnam War into the background. Furthermore, they argued, by switching we could convert the opposition of the university administration into active cooperation, greatly facilitating the event itself.

By the time we had proceeded through about 80% of the participants, one of the original moratorium supporters, Tom Mayer, now at the University of Colorado, reached his turn. He acknowledged the clear majority for dropping the original plan, expressing his disappointment and sadness about the change but pledging his continued support. The acknowledgment broke the tension; as we continued around, the final participants spoke as if the decision to switch had already been made, generally supporting it. No vote was taken nor did one ever seem necessary.

In retrospect, the reasons for switching seem compelling. They became even more so for me personally when someone suggested a modification to meet my objections to business as usual. Instead of beginning during the day, we would begin in the early evening, after classes were over, and continue through the night. Instead of a work moratorium, we would stage a sleep moratorium. By staying up all night to talk about Vietnam, we were certainly abandoning business as usual.

As involved as I was in the original idea, it took me several more hours to fully accept the decision to switch. The meeting lasted until about 4:00 a.m. and, with a press conference scheduled for 10:00 a.m. the next morning, I was unready to say whether I would be there or not. When I showed up, freshly shaven and dressed in my unusual costume of suit and tie, I could see the palpable relief and gratitude on the face of the other spokespersons, Eric Wolf and Arnold Kaufman. I found it very easy to help articulate the reasons for the switch and together we emphasized the content of the planned protest. No, we did not see anything wrong with not presenting “both” sides; the Johnson administration had plenty of forums for developing its position and we intended to use this forum for developing and elaborating a critical view, considering many different aspects of the problem; there were differences among us in analyzing it that we hoped to explore.
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The switch to the all-night teach-in plan brought immediate university cooperation and a substantial turnaround in media treatment. A request for the use of university space to hold the event was granted and we were not charged for the inevitable added expenses for custodial and security services. Parietal hours still existed then for women students living in dormitories and the university cooperated further by suspending them for March 24 so that women could attend the nighttime sessions.

On Monday before the teach-in, the Detroit Free Press ran a story headlined, "Anatomy of 'M' Protest," which opened with Eric Wolf's Silver Star and Purple Heart, earned as a ski trooper in World War II combat. We were reframed sympathetically as "young, mostly in their 30s or early 40s, liberal, and oozing with social conscience." In contrast to the coverage of a week earlier, we were happy to accept a little "ooze."

Some members of the group agreed to call colleagues at other universities, describing what we were doing, and asking them to hold a teach-in on their campus. From this small organizing effort, teach-ins against the Vietnam War were held on more than 50 campuses in the weeks that followed. We did nothing to discourage the belief that these arose spontaneously in response to the people's outrage; nor was this completely false, since it typically takes more than a phone call or two to generate activity of this sort in the absence of a highly conducive climate.

Others may have conducted business as usual during the day of March 24, but many of us were occupied with the arrangements for that evening and night. As for the event itself, it began with plenaries in the evening and continued with workshops and films through the night. Excitement was added by bomb threats and hecklers. In the middle of the evening plenary that I was moderating, a police officer walked down the aisle and handed me a note that read, "Will you please ask the people to vacate—without causing alarm. We have received a threat against the building."

It was a delicate moment. The weather outside was 20°F and windy. Could we hold an overflow crowd of 3000, packed into four separate auditoriums and the hallways, most of them listening to the proceedings over loudspeakers, while we emptied the building? I made a quick decision, interrupting the speaker to make an announcement. We had received a bomb threat, I reported, and while it was likely to be a hoax, we would evacuate the building to allow a search. During evacuation, we would begin the rally scheduled for midnight, returning to the auditorium when the search was completed to hear the rest of the presentation.

The crowd evacuated calmly and most of the audience listened to the rally or temporized for the hour. About 50 to 75 hecklers and counter-demonstrators outside chanted and carried signs saying, "Drop the Bomb," "Better Dead than Red," and "All the way with LBJ." No bombs were
found and we regrouped inside to continue the events, the bomb scare simply adding to the intensity. To my great relief, most of the audience returned.

Ann Arbor was home base, in those days, for many of the talented national leaders of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). In the postmidnight sessions, some of them led workshops on such topics as the military–industrial complex, the cold war, U.S. intervention in the Third World, and mechanisms for changing U.S. foreign policy. The report of the U.S. Senate Sub-Committee on Internal Security made much of the fact that among the films shown during the night, we included one made by the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam that had been smuggled into the country. Boundary lines between young faculty, SDS activists, and undergraduates were blurry and difficult to discern as one wandered from one intense discussion to another during the night.

We had scheduled a plenary session for 6:00 a.m. on “Plans for Future Activities” followed by a 7:00 a.m. rally outside to end the event. This 6:00 a.m. meeting was, for me, the most significant moment of the teach-in. There were still some 500 or so tired survivors around as we gathered in the auditorium.

Arnold Kaufman, a political philosopher who studied and wrote on the concept of participatory democracy, chaired the meeting. He sensed the need to address what had happened on this night before giving thought to future activities. “We’ve been talking all night, telling you what we think. Now I’d like to ask you. Did you learn anything?”

With this invitation, various people in the audience spoke movingly about what they had experienced. What they talked about mostly was not Vietnam or American Foreign policy, but their experience at the university. I quote from a letter describing the meeting, written by Zelda Gamson, a day after the event:

In a very moving meeting at 6:00 a.m. yesterday morning, students stood up and said to a large audience things like: this is what a university should be; this has been the most important experience in their years at Michigan; they see the faculty as human beings, not as busy distant dwellers in an ivory tower. Most of the faculty who worked so hard on this these past two weeks were on the verge of tears.

Susan Harding, now an anthropologist at Santa Cruz, was a freshman at the time of the first teach-in. She describes, in an interview conducted in the late 1970s, her experience at the workshops held during the night:

It was outside of ordinary time and ordinary structures. . . . I’d never been in anything like that before. It was like a classroom, only one that worked, with students speaking, or people in the audience speaking, and debating issues. It wasn’t just full of people who agreed with what the teach-in organizers said. . . . Some of the excitement of it was the emotional quality of the event; it wasn’t just dry, academic, neutral discussion; it was charged with meaning, and emotion, and politi-
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At the time, I might have regarded such sentiments as well and good, but not really relevant to the task of stopping the Vietnam War. We thought of our effort in terms of changing consciousness—of getting people to frame the Vietnam conflict as a civil war arising out of a collapsing colonial system rather than as an “invasion from the North.” Many years of effort would be necessary between March of 1965 and the ultimate discrediting of U.S. Vietnam policy. In retrospect, the contribution of the teach-in to building commitment to the antiwar movement seems far more important then the immediate changes it may have produced in political consciousness.

THE ROMERO ASSASSINATION

The first teach-in marked an early moment in the mobilization of a mass movement against the war in Vietnam. The assassination of Oscar Arnulfo Romero came at a moment in El Salvador when a broad grassroots movement had already achieved a significant level of mobilization, with Romero as one of its most influential and articulate voices. In this case, it is the movement building processes leading up to his murder that will concern us.

First of all, why such an assassination? Why murder an archbishop in a cathedral while he is saying mass and then attack his funeral, killing 20 additional mourners? How did it come about that this living symbol of the Catholic Church in El Salvador could be regarded as such a threat to the ruling military junta and its supporters?

For many years, the Church in El Salvador, as in other parts of Latin America, was a dependable bulwark of the status quo. With Vatican II (1962–1965), this began to change. The ferment had already begun when Latin American bishops met in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968 to apply Vatican II to their continent. Berryman (1985:22) describes the resulting Medellín documents as “a kind of Magna Carta that stimulated church people to examine critically their societies and their own pastoral work.”

The new concept of pastoral work was reflected in the development of the base community. These are variously referred to as comunidades eclesiales de base (CEBs), Christian Base Communities (CBCs), Grassroots Christian Communities, or Basic Ecclesiastical Communities. “Many priests and sisters,” Berryman writes (1985:22), “sought to draw closer to ordinary people, often leaving relative comfort to live among the poor.” As part of their parish work, they would draw together groups of 10–30 people at the village or barrio level for Bible reading, worship, and self-help. By 1980, there were an estimated 10,000 base communities in El Salvador alone (a
country of less than five million people) and well over 100,000 on the continent (Gallo, 1989).

A description of Father Rutilio Grande’s work in the sugar plantation area of Aguilares will help us understand how this organizing effort proceeded. Grande came to Aguilares in 1972 as part of a team of four priests and 20 lay helpers. Gallo (1989:115) describes how they divided the town and surrounding area into zones. “The members of the team would spend fifteen days visiting each family in the zone, eating and sleeping among the people. The pastoral team would talk to the people about what was in the Bible, [explaining that] according to the gospels, they had value as human beings, had a responsibility for themselves and their community.” When most of the team moved on after a couple of weeks, the base community would continue, typically under lay leadership.

Base communities frequently undertook specific projects such as teaching literacy and basic health care, providing workshops on sewing and baking, and cultural programs with dance, theatre, and music. The larger aim of such projects was to provide people with experience in working together and the opportunity to develop leadership skills. As Gallo (1989:162) puts it, “The seeds of a new way of organizing themselves as a people are being learned in these small ways of doing things.”

While initially under the leadership of a parish priest, lay leadership was encouraged to take over as early as feasible. More specifically, two lay roles were created: catechists (lay teachers) and “delegates of the Word” (lay preachers) to carry on the work of the base communities. Between 1970 and 1976, seven training centers were established in El Salvador for catechists and delegates with an estimated cadre of 15,000 trained by 1980 (Herman and Brodhead, 1984).

The practice of the base communities was inextricably linked to a broader ideology and understanding associated with what has come to be called “liberation theology.” Berryman (1985:23) aptly summarizes it as “a way of understanding Christian belief, Christian life, and the mission of the church from the side of the poor and their demand for justice.” There are quite a few differences in emphasis among the writers who are usually included under this rubric; Ferm (1986) illustrates this variation, including African and Asian as well as Latin American writers.

Bible reading, in such a context in El Salvador, is inevitably a subversive activity. Interpretation emphasizes relating faith to what is happening around one. If human beings have been created in God’s image, then to torture another human being is to disfigure God’s image; Jesus’ statement “The poor you have always with you” is not a justification for an exploitative economic system; indeed, the persecution he endured arose out of his struggle for justice while his resurrection was God’s vindication of his life as well as the
lives of those who struggle for justice today. This framing of the world through the eyes of the oppressed—this “preferential option for the poor”—implies a preferential option for change in El Salvador.

There are other aspects of liberation theology that make it relevant for collective action as well. Gutierrez (1973) distinguishes three levels of meaning in the term “liberation,” interwoven to produce a single, complex process. At the most obvious level, it expresses “the aspirations of oppressed peoples and social classes, emphasizing the conflictual aspect of the economic, social, and political processes which puts them at odds with wealthy nations and oppressive classes.” At this level, the theory draws its central concepts from Marxist and neo-Marxist writings.

The second level of liberation centers on ideas of empowerment and agency. To achieve justice, groups that are oppressed or dominated must become subjects of history, not merely objects. People must be encouraged to take a role in creating their own world, individually and collectively. As Gallo (1989:131) describes it, “The Kingdom of God will be constructed not through the charity of the elites, but through the efforts of the organized poor.” Teaching literacy is not a matter of teaching a specific skill but of liberating the whole person, creating a new consciousness of the world and people’s place in it.

This level draws many of its central ideas from Freire’s writings (1970a, 1970b) on cultural action. The experience of oppression and domination is dehumanizing. Base communities should follow practices designed to restore dignity and humanity. This means seeing participants as individual persons, not merely as members of some social category; treating them as co-learners and participants, not as vessels into which one pours enlightenment. It is appropriate to challenge people’s beliefs but one must also listen carefully to understand their everyday experience of oppression.

Finally, there is a theological or Christian level in the meaning of liberation—a way of interpreting scripture and Christian belief. Base community members “find meaning,” Gallo writes (1989:281), “in the life of Jesus who came to liberate the poor and oppressed.” This implies higher laws than those of the government, and higher orders than those of one’s military commander should his commands contravene His commandments. Liberation at the third level provides a justification for resistance and civil disobedience—a reason and even a duty to disobey.

**BASE COMMUNITIES AND POPULAR ORGANIZATIONS**

Base communities are not organized for collective action and are not social movement organizations as such. They are examples of what Morris
(1984) calls “movement halfway houses.” Morris describes such an entity as “an established group or organization that is only partially integrated into the larger society because its participants are actively involved in efforts to bring about a desired change in society” (1984:139). He points to such groups as the American Friends Service Committee, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the War Resisters League, and the Highlander Folk School as examples in the North American context.

Halfway houses provide an environment in which a collective action consciousness—such as liberation theology—is fostered, personal skills are enhanced, knowledge of earlier struggles is acquired, and a vision of a future society is developed. They provide a setting in which cultural action can occur. Base communities provide all of this, but they are not themselves the vehicle of demands for change and collective action.

In El Salvador during the 1970s, and particularly after the fraudulent election of 1972 discredited the electoral system as a possible arena of change, there were two alternatives—nonviolent grassroots organizations or armed insurrection. Two guerrilla organizations were formed in 1970, but they began feuding among themselves and for the first several years carried out few actions against the regime.

In the 1960s, the Christian Democratic Party had, as part of their political work in rural areas, created an organization called FECCAS (Federation of Christian Peasants of El Salvador). With the rise of base communities in the 1970s, FECCAS became a movement organization, demanding land reform, better wages and working conditions, and other social and economic reforms. By 1975, FECCAS was allied with other popular organizations as peasant leaders joined with church workers, university people, labor leaders, and others in a broad reform coalition. Various nonviolent protest actions that they carried out were met with harsh repression.

Proactive regime violence against the movement began in early 1977. In “regime violence,” I include acts carried out by the army, national guard, and by various right-wing paramilitary organizations, especially ORDEN. In El Salvador, such paramilitary organizations do not operate independently, but are organized by present and former military officers. These men continue to control them while holding other roles in the government or army. The most notorious of them, ORDEN, was organized by senior national guard officer General José Medrano during the early 1960s. He describes the State Department and CIA help and encouragement he received as part of the Kennedy administration’s counterinsurgency effort (Berryman, 1985:21–22). ORDEN came to play a major role in the regime violence of the 1970s and 1980s.

I have not been able to discover any estimates, but observers note that the base communities provided much of the leadership for FECCAS
and other popular organizations in the communities where they existed. Areas that had strong base communities were the same ones that had strong popular organizations. Presumably, this close interconnection explains why regime violence was specifically directed against priests.

In January 1977, several priests were arrested and tortured, and some were expelled from the country. In March, Father Grande was gunned down while driving through a cane field in Aguilares. In May, another priest was killed in San Salvador. In June, a paramilitary organization founded by Roberto D'Aubuisson, the White Warriors Union, ordered all Jesuits to leave the country, promising to murder them one by one if they stayed.

The Jesuits stayed and the popular movement continued to grow. Guerrilla groups also became more active during this period, carrying out various kidnappings with demands for ransom and the release of captured comrades or allies. By the end of the 1970s, several hundred thousand people in El Salvador (in a population under five million) had become involved in popular organizations which became the main target of regime violence.

Regime violence against civilians began to increase sharply in 1979 but really took off after the new junta assumed power in December of that year. Killings and disappearances had been going on at a rate of a few dozen a year through 1978 and had climbed to 300 for 1979 by October of that year. But in the one month of December 1979, the total reached almost 300 and in 1980, jumped to over 10,000 for the year. After mid-1980, nonviolent public opposition became essentially impossible with the popular organizations suppressed.

Nevertheless, the Archbishop of San Salvador continued to speak out. His weekly sermons, broadcast over the diocesan radio station, reached an estimated 73% of the rural population and 47% of the urban (Gallo, 1989:112). His sermons defended the popular movement organizations as legitimate expressions of the aspirations of peasants and workers, but he urged that they not be confused with the base communities or be regarded as the same thing. He continued to denounce the widespread regime violence against civilians. In a letter to President Jimmy Carter in February 1980, he urged the United States to discontinue its military aid to the regime, threatening its life blood.

On March 23, with regime violence rapidly escalating, Romero appealed directly to the men who carried it out:

I want to make a special appeal to soldiers, national guardsmen, and policemen: Brothers, each one of you is one of us. We are the same people. The campesinos you kill are your own brothers and sisters. . . . No soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of God. It is time that you come to your senses and obey your consciences rather than follow out a sinful command. . . . I beseech you, I
beg you, I order you in the name of God, stop the repression! (quoted in Erdozain, 1981:75).

His murder the next day was a major step in the campaign to destroy public, nonviolent opposition to the regime.

MOVEMENT IDENTITY

First, a bit about the concept of collective identity. Identity issues have had a checkered career among students of social movements over the past 60 years. They were central in the work of mass society theorists who tried to understand the rise of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s. They remained central during the first cold war when the same paradigm was applied to “extremism of the left,” they became discredited during the 1960s and 1970s because of the inadequacies of the mass society paradigm in which they were embedded, and they have now rebounded in new form and are back on center stage.

Much of the credit for the reemergence belongs to European theorists who have made identity issues a central focus of their effort to understand so-called new social movements—especially the environmental, antinuclear, and peace movements. Melucci (1989) has an especially rich discussion of identity issues built around the concept of “collective identity.” He suggests that the construction of a collective identity is a negotiated process in which the “we” involved in collective action is elaborated and given meaning. Some movement groups are even reflexive about this process—taking time to make the question of “who we are” part of their internal discourse. This is especially likely to happen, collective identity theorists hypothesize, when a group lacks an easily identifiable common social location in a class or ethnic group.

The concept of collective identity is not well specified. I suggest that we think of it as three embedded layers: organizational, movement, and solidary. The organizational layer refers to identities built around movement carriers—the union maid or the party loyalist, for example. This layer may or may not be embedded in a movement layer that is broader than any particular carrier. The identity of peace activists, for example, often does not rest on any particular movement carrier; many support different efforts at different moments while subordinating all carriers to their broader movement identity.

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

Sometimes these different layers are so closely integrated that they become a single amalgam: a movement arises out of a particular solidarity group with widespread support from it, and one particular organization comes to embody the movement. This seems largely true, for example, between black South Africans, the antiapartheid movement, and the African National Congress. But often the different collective identities are separate. Many working-class Americans, for example, personally identify as "working people," but have no identification with their union and think of the "labor movement" as something that happened 50 years ago.

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

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

What can we learn about these collective identity processes from the two cases considered in this paper? The teach-in depended and built on a preexisting movement identity. First, there were close relationships among many faculty members and the new left activists who made Ann Arbor their base. When I began teaching at Michigan in 1962, it was only a few months after student activists had met at Port Huron and formulated a statement that became, in effect, the charter for SDS. Port Huron participants began showing up regularly in my classes.

We had further contact at a movement halfway house within the university, the Center for Research on Conflict Resolution. The center, with its Journal of Conflict Resolution, extended the peace movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s into the academy. I was part of this interdisciplinary peace research movement, carrying out my research on the cold war through the center. With an irony that we all appreciated, we were housed in a building formerly occupied by ROTC.
Two SDS projects—the Peace Research and Education Project and the Education Research and Action Project—became a quasi-official part of the center's activities, with offices there as well. New left students and faculty interacted in the hallways and meeting spaces, discussing what was happening in the world, and what we and others were doing about it.

Furthermore, several members of the teach-in group had been involved earlier in the civil rights movement. Some of us had picketed Woolworth's in support of the sit-in movement in the South and been involved in the testing of antidiscrimination housing ordinances. Many of the New Left students had gone south to participate in voter registration efforts such as Mississippi Freedom Summer.

We were not reflexive about a "movement identity" and never thought to ask who "we" were, but at some level we clearly recognized other faculty and student activists as part of a vague collective who shared much more than merely opposition to U.S. Vietnam policy. When I mentioned I. F. Stone's devastating analysis of the State Department "White Paper" on Vietnam, I could assume that everyone knew what I was talking about and that most were probably subscribers to his weekly newsletter. Whoever "we" were, we shared many elements of a common movement culture and identity.

For better or worse, movement identities create boundaries between an "us" and a "them." From the beginning, we made sharp distinctions between two types of critics: those who were part of the broader movement and those who were not. This was not a distinction based on support vs. opposition to Vietnam policies or other shared attitudes; a collective identity is more cultural than cognitive, demonstrated both by language and symbols, and by other forms of participation in movement actions and culture. Opposition from "movement" people, however vaguely defined, was a problem and their objections had to be taken seriously; opposition from others, many with a primary interest in social control, was inevitable and could be written off.

The teach-in was also a critical event in building and strengthening a movement identity. It helped forge movement-identified faculty and students into a coherent group with a capacity for acting collectively. At the same time, it drew into the organizational carrier many new faculty and students who had not previously been movement identified. For some of these, the teach-in was a passing experience but for others, it began a continuing process that eventually led them to adopt a movement identity. The teach-in also helped to build a much stronger link between faculty and the student network centered around SDS: we shared a common movement identity.

After the teach-in, I was aware of movement faculty throughout the university, and not only in the social sciences and humanities that formed
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our largest constituency. We had become an invisible college or, more accurately, a semivisible one since our participation was so public. This group played a central role in faculty participation on a broad range of movement issues beyond Vietnam, including student participation in university and department governance, classified research on campus, and the creation of experimental programs and colleges.

Similar identity-building processes were going on in El Salvador in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although they did not use the term, the base communities were heavily involved in the process of creating a movement collective identity. Those Church members who embraced the Medellín charter and the base communities as its expression became a "we" within the Church. This movement was much more reflexive than the teach-in movement and this makes it easier to identify the content of this collective identity.

The Church of the base communities—this movement Church—defined itself in part by its contrasts with the traditional Church. The traditional Church separated religion and politics; the movement Church saw them as a seamless web. In the movement church, one expressed one's faith and religious commitment through sharing the struggles of the poor for social justice. The traditional Church accommodates itself to the regime, avoiding confrontation while attempting to mitigate abuses and appealing to the goodwill of those responsible for exploitation and regime violence; the movement Church opposes those regimes that are a primary source of oppression and an obstacle to necessary changes.

One becomes part of the traditional Church by accepting doctrinal beliefs and participating in the sacraments; one becomes part of the movement Church by participating in the struggle for social justice through the praxis of base communities. By this conception, one need not necessarily be a believer to participate if one's actions reflect the full meaning of the preferential option for the poor.

In emphasizing the importance of practice over doctrinal belief, I do not mean to deny the explicitly religious component of this collective identity. Participants understood their practice as the application of a way of understanding the meaning of their lives as Christians. Many participants emphasized the importance of the spiritual dimension in providing a deeper bond among the participants, as in the following quote from Cardinal Arns:

People do not come to the [base communities] when there is no praying or singing. They may come four or five times to reorganize practical things but nothing further will come of it. When, however, people pray and sing, when they feel themselves together, when the Gospel is read and, on this basis, concrete actions are organized and the national situation analyzed, then the groups remain united (quoted in Deelen, 1980:394).
Many individual Church members, of course, did not fully embrace one or the other identity, but attempted to bridge them in one form or another. Romero himself was not really identified with the movement Church until after the regime violence started in 1977. He was a personal friend and admirer of Rutilio Grande, the priest who had organized base communities in Aguilares and was murdered in March of that year, the first of many. Romero’s subsequent public denunciations of regime violence and in support of the reforms sought by popular organizations eventually led him to become the most influential spokesman for the movement Church in El Salvador.

Cultural action attempts to link organizational, movement, and solidary layers of collective identity into a unified movement identity. In discussing adult literacy programs, for example, Freire (1970b) is highly critical of mechanistic approaches that conceive of these programs as teaching a skill. If done properly, Freire argues, teaching literacy gives voice to the voiceless and destroys the culture of silence that helps maintain their oppression, allowing oppressed peoples both to understand their experience in sociocultural terms and to realize their capacity to transform that reality. It implies the need for reflexiveness about who they are collectively and their potentiality as agents of change. Freire labels the process with the awkward word, conscientization.

If participation in a base community helped create a movement identity, participation in a nonviolent popular movement such as FECCAS or the guerrilla movement led by the FMLN fused the different layers of collective identity. Gallo (1989) conducted interviews with lay members of base communities, asking people “What or who is the Church for you?” Many of their answers illustrate the merged identity. “For me, the Church is the people who suffer,” said one; “We form it—all of the poor. The Church is formed by those who take up their faith [and work] to transform this to a just society,” said another (Gallo, 1989:125).

Gallo’s interviews also illustrate the ability of the base communities to bridge personal and collective identities. Note in the quotation below, the easy transition from “I” to “we” in the final sentence. The young man describes how initially he was “pretty much outside of the church” but became involved in a base community through his older brother and became close to two of the priests involved.

I came to know things a little bit more and I committed myself. It was never planned. I related more to what I had learned here in the community. It has given more meaning to my life, how to live, why to live. I came to see that one must not live just passing time. We must work to change something (quoted in Gallo, 1989:136).
Regime violence, by refusing to distinguish between organizational and movement identification in choosing its victims, helps further in creating an amalgam. By treating the whole population as hostile in areas where regime opposition is strong, regime violence helps to merge movement and solidary layers.

COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AND SOLIDARITY

Collective identity and solidarity are intertwined in practice, but there is a useful analytic distinction worth maintaining. Collective identity refers to a process in which movement participants socially construct a “we” that becomes, in varying degrees with different individuals, part of their own definition of self. But the merging of individual and collective selves is rarely if ever complete. Personal identities are composed of numerous subidentities and, however much we may identify with a movement, we have other subidentities built around other social roles. Inevitably, we may face conflicts between how we as movement members feel called upon to act and the actions called for by these other role identities.

Solidarity refers to the strength of our loyalties and commitment to a movement collective identity. To what extent, people may ask themselves, is the collective entity worthy of personal sacrifice, and how much should it take priority over the needs and demands of everyday life, including survival? The two cases examined here underline the importance of publicly shared risks as a mechanism in the creation of such solidarity among movement participants.

External attack on a group or movement can have contradictory effects under different conditions, sometimes increasing and sometimes decreasing solidarity. It is a process that feeds on itself. Every attack is a test, forcing participants to consider whether the group deserves their loyalty and is worth the risks involved. The willingness of people to maintain or even increase their commitment by linking themselves to the collective entity under attack is a powerful stimulus for others to do the same.

It was enormously important to the teach-in group that, far from causing defections, attacks by the governor and state legislature stimulated many new people to join us. It decreased our vulnerability considerably as we moved from a group of 13 to 46 during the first week. I sensed that some of the earliest participants did not fully appreciate the fire storm our planned action would ignite, yet none pulled out. Later arrivals could no longer be naive about the reaction and yet, in spite of misgivings about tactics, they joined us.
Hirschman (1970) argues that loyalty leads people to choose voice rather than exit as an option when they are dissatisfied. In this case, loyalty was so strong that it led people to seek entry, thereby creating voice. Condemnation and threats by authorities activated a contrary response: for some people, it provided all the more reason to identify themselves with those who were challenging U.S. policy in Vietnam.

It was critical that the group proposing the 24-hour teach-in demonstrated their solidarity and continued commitment to the fate of the group by pledging publicly to support the original plan if the group rejected their alternative. It was equally important that those who had supported the original work moratorium fully and actively embraced the chosen alternative. All of these acts asserted that what we had in common carried priority over any disagreements on the tactics of our protest. The first teach-in ended with a lasting bond among the participants that carried over into the long years of the anti-Vietnam War movement that followed it.

The same voluntary risk sharing built solidarity among those seeking social justice in El Salvador. The priests and sisters in base communities chose to live among the poor; the very idea of an “option” for the poor underlies the voluntary nature of the choice. They chose to remain in the face of assassinations and highly credible death threats. The members of base communities typically responded to regime threats and violence by organizing vigils, holding press conferences, and in other ways demonstrating publicly their solidarity with the threatened. One woman interviewed by Gallo describes her sadness and rage at the death of a member who had moved there to work with a base community (1989:175).

She had worked in the war zones for four years. She was someone seen as very courageous. She took chances in spite of so much bombing. She had the opportunity of leaving but she did not. I believe there’s sadness at first but this gives us the courage to continue—to look at what I am doing. If some of our sisters and brothers give of themselves, I can give more.

Public demonstrations of commitment under conditions of risk help create solidarity and strengthen it; movement identity is central to the willingness to undertake such risks. Some people may join initially because of personal loyalties and social bonds with individuals who are involved or because of ideological commitment rather than because of any internalized movement identity. But since agents of social control do not distinguish motives, they will be treated like any other member of the movement and, under the circumstances, a broader movement identity is likely to develop.

When a collective identity becomes a central part of one’s personal identity, group solidarity and personal honor become indistinguishable. Subjectively, participants may experience no choice. Members of a base community who stand by those under attack for seeking social justice are
likely to feel that they could not act differently and remain good Christians. Similarly, many who joined the anti-Vietnam War movement felt they could not live with themselves if they remained passive observers.

THE CULTURE OF DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

Accounts by movement participants about the quality of social relationships in their movement have a tendency to be idealized, sometimes reflecting wishful thinking about how things ought to be. We all know of cases where groups that claim adherence to equality of participation and respect for others, in fact, operate with unacknowledged hierarchy and follow practices that systematically silence and exclude some participants. One is right to be skeptical about movement ideologies on these issues, and to treat their presence or absence in practice as variable and requiring close observation.

A vision of democratic participation, then, is not sufficient but, at a minimum, it provides an instrument for participants to challenge those practices that fail to uphold it. The vision, as Flacks (1988:7) describes it, is the idea “that the people are capable of and ought to be making their own history, that the making of history ought to be integrated with everyday life, that all social arrangements that perpetuate separation of history making from daily life can and must be replaced by frameworks that permit routine access and participation by all in the decisions that affect their lives.” It is a vision of agency and empowerment. The idea of agency is highly explicit in the ideology of base communities, especially in the use of Freire’s concept of conscientization. Members of base communities are not doing something for the poor but are standing with them as they themselves become the agents of change. Agency is contained in the idea that one learns from the poor and they learn from each other by exploring the reality of their everyday lives. Cultural action is heavily oriented toward the development of collective agency.

The idea of agency was equally explicit in the New Left writings on participatory democracy in the early 1960s. “Independence can be a fact about ordinary people,” Hayden wrote in 1962. “And democracy, real participating democracy, rests on the independence of ordinary people” (quoted in Breines, 1982:57). Everyone was assumed equal in their potential understanding and contribution.

I am well aware of the departures from this ideal in the teach-in and anti-Vietnam War movement. The teach-in group was just as guilty of unconscious sexism, for example, as other movement groups of that era. Traditional hierarchical relations did not disappear. But when women and
students among us began asserting their own sense of agency, movement faculty were among the most responsive to this changing consciousness. Movement-identified faculty were more likely to be attracted to teaching styles and educational innovations that involved students actively and collaboratively in the learning process.

**PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS**

Movement organizations that apply this vision to their own internal operations engage in what Breines (1982:6) calls “prefigurative politics.” She describes it as an attempt “to create and sustain within the live practice of the movement, relationships and political forms that ‘prefigure’ and embody the desired society.” More specifically, the relationships and forms are egalitarian, nonhierarchical, and mutually supportive.

In the New Left movement of the 1960s that she examined, the desired relationships were embodied in the concept of the beloved community. Participants sought relationships “more direct, more total and more personal than the formal, abstract and instrumental relationships characterizing state and society” (Breines, 1982:6–7). Lines between personal and political were blurred; political meaning was contained in the way people treated each other, captured in the phrase, “the personal is political.”

Breines traces the idea of community in the New Left from its origins in the civil rights movement; it was expressed in the early community organizing projects of SDS, which attempted to establish secular base communities among poor blacks and whites in Northern cities. The quest for more equal and caring relationships became a goal in itself, not one to be subordinated in the desire to transform society. Movement practices that imitated the hierarchical, compartmentalized relationships in the world that one was attempting to change were suspect.

Base communities in Latin America have a similar quest for community. Bruneau (1982:228) expresses the antihierarchical element very explicitly:

> Bringing the Bible into the hands and finally control of the people is particularly important because they can grasp the meaning of religion, as stated in the Bible, rather than being obliged to rely on the potentially paternalistic role of the clergy or pastoral animators. In this situation, the pastoral animators are no longer people from without and above but rather find themselves more or less on the same level as the masses.

Base communities seek to change the traditional relationship between the church and the people. Priests and bishops should think of themselves as serving and guiding, not telling people how to act. Base communities, Gallo (1989:281) claims, “foster relationships which are horizontal, non-
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hierarchical, and egalitarian with decisions made in a democratic and participatory mode. Bishops, priests, and laity are all perceived as equal, for all are part of the People of God.”

Breines's analysis highlights the undeniable tension and dilemmas between prefigurative politics and strategic politics in the New Left. Mobilizing people for collective action requires that decisions of all sorts must be made, sometimes quite rapidly and under conditions of risk and constraints on communication. Trade-offs of various sorts are unavoidable and I am not arguing that prefigurative politics should take precedence over strategic politics.

Social relationships and political forms that express ideas of empowerment and community help produce a sense of agency and long-term commitment. But if they result in organizational paralysis and strategic fiascos, such commitment and agency will almost certainly be undercut and discouraged. The trick is to find ways of meeting strategic imperatives that recognize the value of prefigurative politics, and that do not undermine or destroy the culture of democratic participation. If there is no simple formula, at least the movements considered here were able to mobilize large numbers for collective action while simultaneously striving, with varying degrees of success, to practice prefigurative politics.

DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The best long-run guarantor of democratic participation in a movement is a collective identity that incorporates the idea of people as collective agents of their own destiny, and adopts a practice that encourages them to be active and collaborative. Formal procedures for decision making and accountability of leaders may help, but are insufficient by themselves. The varying conditions under which a movement operates may require flexible decision-making procedures. The same procedure that, in one context, encourages democratic participation may thwart it under other conditions.

Sometimes going around a room and allowing all to express their views may be quite feasible and appropriate. But one reserves such a procedure for unusual circumstances; a movement organization would face paralysis if it tried to make day-to-day decisions this way. The demand for consensus can prevent majorities from acting, and can allow decisions to be made informally and invisibly with less accountability.

Nor do democratic rules of decision making necessarily solve the problem. Rules can be manipulated to discourage participation, and to produce quiescence and passivity. Matters that come to a vote may not really matter,
while important decisions are kept off the agenda. Many formally democratic organizations do not follow practices that encourage agency and commitment. Movements that take seriously the goal of enhancing the capacity of people for collective action must make sure that their practices do in fact promote and encourage participants to be active and collaborative.

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