11-1-1999

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*Recent work by political sociologists and social movement theorists extend our under-
standing of how religious institutions contribute to expanding democracy, but nearly
all analyze religious institutions as institutions; few focus directly on what religion qua
religion might contribute. This article strives to illuminate the impact of religious cul-
ture per se, extending recent work on religion and democratic life by a small group of
social movement scholars trained also in the sociology of religion. In examining reli-
gion's democratic impact, an explicitly cultural analysis inspired by the new approach
to political culture developed by historical sociologists and cultural analysts of democ-
racy is used to show the power of this approach and to provide a fuller theoretical
account of how cultural dynamics shape political outcomes. The article examines reli-
gious institutions as generators of religious culture, presents a theoretical model of
how religious cultural elements are incorporated into social movements and so shape
their internal political cultures, and discusses how this in turn shapes their impact in
the public realm. This model is then applied to a key site of democratic struggle: four
efforts to promote social justice among low-income urban residents of the United States,
including the most widespread such effort—faith-based community organizing.*

Perennial questions regarding how democracy can be deepened are raised anew by con-
tinuing *substantive* inequality born of economic globalization, even as political democracy
(and its associated *formal* equality) has triumphed on the world stage. Religion as a source
of democratization deserves renewed attention:[1] religious institutions and religious believ-
ers have recently played crucial roles in opening up totalitarian and authoritarian regimes
to democratizing pressures in Eastern Europe and Latin America (Casanova 1994; Levine
and Mainwaring 1986); in raising new democratic demands in established democracies
(Epstein 1991; Morris 1984; Casanova 1994); and in providing democratic skills and
organizational strength in civil society (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Thus, the
question of how and under what circumstances religion makes a democratic difference
takes on new theoretical and empirical urgency.

At the same time, recent advances in understanding political culture (Lichterman 1996;
Hart forthcoming; Eliasoph 1998; Williams 1995; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and
Tipton 1985, 1991), the origins of the democratic public realm (Somers 1993, 1995a,

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[1] A vast literature discusses the term "democracy" and lies beyond the scope of this article. I use the term to
denote both a political system that allows equitable participation by those governed in defining the rules under
which they live, and a societal outcome of such systems, namely relatively greater equality in society. Increases
in these two dimensions of "voice" and "equality" constitute democratic renewal. See Verba, Schlozman, and
Brady (1995).

1995b), and civil society (Cohen and Arato 1992) provide important new conceptual tools for answering this question. This article strives to bring these conceptual tools and the theoretical sensitivity to "the causal autonomy of culture" (Somers 1995b) underlying them to bear in understanding religion's contribution to democracy.

This is not entirely unplowed terrain. Recent work in the fields of social movements, political sociology, and political theory suggest a series of partial answers. The social movements literature suggests that religion can help to *mobilize resources* for groups and organizations seeking to expand democratic participation or protect the interests of the marginalized (Zald and McCarthy 1987; McAdam 1982; Morris 1984; Smith 1991). The political sociology literature documents that religion provides an important source of *social capital* and *democratic skills* that facilitate democratic participation (Greeley 1997; Putnam 1993, 1995a;[2] Warren 1995; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Wood 1995, 1997). The literature on democratic theory suggests that religion helps sustain the *civil society* within which political alternatives develop and free political discussion can occur (Cohen and Arato 1992; Casanova 1994). These answers emphasize the important role of religion as one kind of social institution serving these purposes. In doing so, none makes clear whether religious faith *per se* matters. That is, they leave unanswered whether it matters that the people mobilizing resources, generating social capital, learning democratic skills, or engaging in civic life are doing so within a religious context, with a worldview constructed through religious sources of meaning.

This article goes beyond these answers by asking what **religious culture** *per se* might contribute. Previous work by Epstein (1991) and by Morris (1984) has touched tangentially on this question. Epstein finds that religiously affiliated strands of the "direct action" movement of the 1970s and 1980s were more stable than the secular strands. But her otherwise insightful work is rather "tone deaf" (to use Max Weber's image) to any cultural strengths of traditional religion, tracing stability only to resource flows and social legitimacy.[3] Indeed, religious culture becomes the dark underside that undermines the otherwise positive contributions made by religious people to the movement (*ibid.:* 214ff.). Morris's work on the civil rights movement is more "religiously musical," but his theoretical tools focus on organizational strength and thus provide limited insight into religio-political cultural dynamics.

Among social movement scholars, Christian Smith has recently made the most important progress on this terrain. His overview of "disruptive religion" (1996b) documents the multifaceted "religious assets for activism," some of which are clearly cultural assets. The case studies in the same volume provide rich empirical detail showing how religion matters for social protest. Likewise, Smith's work on U.S. religious resistance to counterinsurgency in Central America (1996a, esp. 133ff.) provides important cultural insight by analyzing the moral outrage underlying "insurgent consciousness." He documents how religion made certain individuals "cognitively accessible" for mobilization by shaping the moral sensibilities whose violation generated outrage, and how religious networks made some people "subjectively engageable" for mobilization. Underlying Smith's analysis is an understanding of human actors as moral selves who build creative lives out of internal divisions and tensions (*ibid.:* 191ff.); this gives his work a religious musicality often lacking in that of other theorists of social movements.

Similarly, Dwight Billings's (1990) work on religion as an oppositional social force provides rich insight into the construction of a counterhegemonic culture of resistance, but

[2]The social capital debate, in particular, has generated rich controversy. See also Putnam (1995b); Skocpol (1996a, 1996b); Foley and Edwards (1997, 1996).
[3]See also Williams and Demerath (1991, esp. 425ff.) for an insightful discussion of religious legitimacy as a political resource, in settings similar to those studied here.

his Gramscian theoretical framework focuses on leadership resources, organizational auton-
omy, and social networks as plausibility structures rather than on cultural dynamics. Bill-
ings takes religion seriously and depicts it convincingly, but his theoretical tools do not
offer leverage for analyzing religious culture.

For all their strengths, including rich empirical evidence that religion both enables and
constrains democratic action in important ways, none of these works focus on providing
theoretical tools for understanding how religious culture *per se* shapes a political culture of
democratic engagement. I strive to do so by focusing on the cultural dynamics within
organizations seeking to project power into the public sphere, drawing on and providing
stronger theoretical underpinning to these findings regarding religion and democracy. Again,
attention to this level of analysis is not entirely new: Snow and his collaborators have
provided one important answer to how culture matters—social movement actors use cul-
ture to *frame issues* to attract potential participants (Snow 1986; Snow and Benford 1992,
1988). Clearly, religious language and imagery provide a salient set of tools for framing
issues within American social movements, not only on the right (Reed 1996; Wald 1992)
but also on the left (Smith 1991). Though early work in this vein (Snow 1986; Snow and
Benford 1988) focused narrowly on the mobilization phase of social movements, more
recent efforts (Snow and Benford 1992) have broadened to examine cultural framing through-
out protest cycles. However, "framing"—even in this broader work—represents only one
facet of the important cultural processes within social movements. Instead of focusing on
the processes of cultural framing or identity construction (Teske 1997; Smith 1996a) that
occur within challenger groups, like an emerging body of work on the political culture of
democratic engagement (Lichterman 1996; Hart 1992, forthcoming; Williams 1995; Johnston
and Klandermans 1995), I focus on the long-term construction of an internal political
culture within such groups.[4] This article analyzes how social movements draw religious
cultural elements from faith communities, how these elements shape their internal political
cultures, and how this affects their ability to engage effectively in the public arena. Among
theorists, this work lies closest to that of Margaret Somers (1993), especially her call for a
"sociology of relationships among public spheres, community associational life, and pat-
terns of political culture" to understand the historical origins of democracy (see also Som-
ers 1995a, 1995b, 1992).[5] I adopt a similar theoretical stance in examining the rather
different terrain of contemporary democratic life.

After outlining the research design and methods used in this study, I proceed in two
directions: first, to a more theoretical level by analyzing how the cultural patterns and
resources embedded in society are channeled into—and make a difference in—political
life; second, to a more empirical level by examining cultural dynamics within three reli-
giously based political organizing efforts and (for comparative purposes) one secular polit-
ical organizing effort. Throughout, the focus is on understanding the broad cultural processes
within movements to expand democracy, and how religious culture at times contributes to
and at times undermines these processes.

I. CONCEPTS, RESEARCH DESIGN, AND METHODS

For democracy to thrive, political institutions must be constantly renewed through demo-
cratic action on behalf of those excluded from the polity. As the political power of labor

[4] That is, I do not here engage directly the literature on "identity politics," but rather focus on the ways a choice
of cultural strategy shapes the internal construction of an organizational political culture. See also Eliasoph's
important work (1998) on how people actively *avoid* building such a political culture.
[5] Somers offers an approach to political culture quite different than that represented in such classics of mod-
ernization theory as Almond and Verba (1963).

unions has waned, and as electoral politics have come to be dominated by fund-raising, opinion polling, and television advertising, low- and middle-income urban residents find it increasingly difficult to project power into the public arena. If they do so at all, it is by organizing large numbers of people together; that is, they exert "people power" rather than the political power of campaign contributions, in which they are vastly outspent by more affluent residents (Verba et al. 1995: 191-96). The task of holding together large numbers of people, and getting them to act politically in coordinated fashion, requires the community organization to construct a **political culture** at least partially shared by its constituents— that is, a set of shared assumptions, perceptions of the world, symbols, and concepts that help them interpret and act in the political world. But such a political culture is not built *ex nihilo*. Rather, potential leaders come already embedded in multiple networks and social terrains based on racial and ethnic identity, political affiliation and experience, educational and employment status, religious commitment, age and generational status, family ties, sexual identity, and so on. No community organization appeals simultaneously to all these aspects of their potential leaders' social terrain. Rather, each relies on a **cultural strategy**: a more-or-less conscious decision to construct an organizational political culture by drawing cultural elements from a particular segment of their potential participants' social terrain. Of course, political organizers can insert cultural elements of their own, or create new ones in collaboration with local leaders, but this is an arduous process, and is greatly facilitated if built on a foundation of cultural elements already institutionalized in participants' lives. Such potential cultural elements are numerous, but not infinite. In adopting a cultural strategy, an organization chooses from what aspect of participants' lives they will draw these institutionalized cultural elements.

Once the organization chooses a cultural strategy, it focuses attention on some segments of participants' cultural terrain rather than on others. This area of primary attention becomes the organizations' **cultural base** for its work in developing leaders and building a political culture.

In choosing political organizing efforts to study, I was guided by an interest in efforts to empower social sectors relatively disadvantaged in American society. Thus, I studied organizations pressing for more effective representation of the interests of people economically disadvantaged or politically marginalized. Among the most effective such challenger groups operating today in the United States are those engaged in "community organizing" (Boyte 1989; Greider 1992; Warren 1995; Wood 1995, 1997). As documented in a book by Stephen Hart (forthcoming, based on a 1994 survey), such efforts exist in some ninety metropolitan areas around the country. Most are based in urban religious congregations; some 1.5 million people are members of the participating congregations, 35 percent of which are predominantly African American, 18 percent Hispanic, 46 percent European American, and 1 percent Asian American. These "church-based community organizing" efforts thus make up far and away the most widespread social movement advocating social justice among poor and working-class Americans today.

A second fairly widespread and effective model of community organizing, albeit without the broad social movement character of church-based organizing, is "multiracial organizing" (Anner 1996). Community organizing efforts under this model work in urban settings and among low-income constituencies similar to those active in church-based organizing—indeed, sometimes in identical neighborhoods. The participants in multiracial organizing tend to be predominantly African American and Hispanic, with smaller numbers of Asian Americans, European Americans, and Native Americans (Delgado 1994).

Examining the cultural dynamics within these two models allows strong comparative analysis of the construction of political culture because one does so by appealing to par-

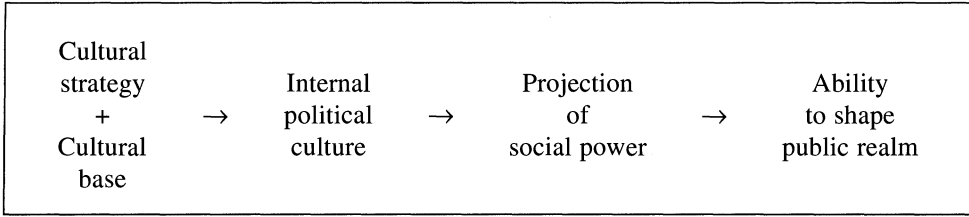| Cultural					
strategy		Internal		Projection	Ability
+	$\rightarrow$	political	$\rightarrow$	of	$\rightarrow$ to shape
Cultural		culture		social power	public realm
base					

Figure 1. Cultural Influences on Political Effectiveness of Challenger Groups

ticipants' religious identity while the other does so by appealing to their racial identity. That is, though they organize in identical settings, different organizers choose different cultural strategies; each then builds on a somewhat different cultural base, and as a result their organizations embody different political cultures.

This choice of cultural strategy is crucial for at least two reasons. First, it represents one of the few areas in which challenger groups can choose their own terrain of struggle: political organizers have little choice (at least in the short term) regarding the structure of political opportunities they face or the material resources on which they can draw. But since real human communities have complex and multifaceted cultural traditions, organizers have a great deal of leeway in adopting a cultural strategy. Second, as I show below, the choice matters enormously: the foundation on which a group constructs its internal political culture and the cultural patterns it institutionalizes shape its ability to project power into the political arena and gain a voice in public life. In Somers's terms (1993), the choice of cultural strategy directly affects which elements of community associational life the organization will draw upon. Both this choice and the resulting associational patterns structure the organization's internal political culture, which in turn partially determines the organization's ability to shape the public realm.[6] This process is shown in Figure 1.

Of course, this building of a political culture occurs in the wider context of social power. But we already know a great deal about how the wider social context constrains the exercise of democratic power by those marginalized from effective political participation due to race or socioeconomic status (Verba et al. 1995). In this research I hold constant that wider context of power, in order to focus on the markedly different cultural strategies that two organizations use to overcome these constraints. The Center for Third World Organizing (CTWO), operating under the model of multiracial organizing it developed, constructs its political culture around an appeal to the racial/ethnic identity of those marginalized by American society. In practice, this means a cultural strategy appealing first to constituents' **racial identities** as African Americans, Latinos, Asian immigrants, etc., then forging a shared cultural identity as "people of color." The Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO) has developed a model of "faith-based organizing," constructing its political culture around an appeal to the **religious identities** of African Americans, Latinos, whites, and (to a lesser extent) Asian immigrants.[7] Thus, both organizations end up with highly multiracial constituencies, but do so on the basis of divergent cultural strategies. They thus strive to project power into the public realm on the basis of quite different

[6]The phrase "shape the public realm" here includes both the organization's ability to *construct* new public spaces in interaction with political institutions and elites, and its ability to *influence the decisions* made in the public arena. Often, only the latter is included in discussions of political effectiveness, but the former is equally important.

[7]PICO is one of four national or regional networks sponsoring faith-based community organizing in the United States. The others are the Industrial Areas Foundation, Gamaliel, and DART.

internal political cultures. In order to isolate these internal cultural dynamics and analyze how they affect the organizations' political capacity, I study parallel community organizing efforts operating out of essentially the same areas and even neighborhoods of one city: Oakland, California. Thus, over the three-year course of this study, the two organizations faced identical political environments and political opportunity structures. The two organizations also drew on similar levels of financial support, varying between $130,000 and $180,000 per year. Further testimony that these two organizations represent an appropriate comparison came from a local political insider, who noted in an interview: "[PICO and CTWO] are the two groups that everybody knows in city government. Everybody talks about them, refers to them at least on the issues that they bring up."

I conducted participant-observation in CTWO and PICO from 1992 to 1995. This involved attendance at public political actions, private organizational meetings with elected officials, training sessions for organizational leaders, church worship services, other cultural events, staff meetings, and strategy meetings of leaders. In addition, I conducted 42 formal interviews with staff organizers and participants in the two organizations. In order to check whether my findings were idiosyncratic to Oakland or were reasonably representative of dynamics in community organizing efforts elsewhere in the United States, I also conducted 40 formal interviews with staff organizers, participants, and targeted elected officials in six cities nationwide, including two cities in which both CTWO and PICO operate. Although this paper draws only on the Oakland research, the findings reported here are characteristic of the patterns found elsewhere.

Further variation occurs within the PICO-led organizing effort in Oakland, because it is based in some twenty-five religious congregations embodying different religious cultures; each thus brings a somewhat different cultural base to the organizing. Here, I draw on data from the organizing efforts in three of the congregations; though all are Christian, their religious cultures are markedly different. All are located in working-class areas that have suffered from job loss and the erosion of social infrastructure during the economic restructuring of the last twenty years. PICO's organizing effort in Oakland worked partly through these three churches as "local organizing committees" for its overall effort. Thus, a total of four organizing efforts form the focus of this paper. Of these four groups, three represent various incarnations of religious culture prominent in urban America, and one represents an alternative, non-religious cultural strategy. These case studies allow a comparative analysis of religious and secular cultural dynamics, how various forms of religious culture shape political organizing, and how these lead to divergent levels of political capacity.

II. POLITICAL CULTURE WITHIN CHALLENGER GROUPS: THEORETICAL INSIGHTS

Organizations striving to develop effective political leadership from marginalized constituencies face a series of challenges; I will focus on those related to sustaining viable, long-term participation in public life. That is, I focus less on the early challenges related to framing issues and mobilizing initial participants in a social movement (Snow and Benford 1988, 1992; Tarrow 1994), than on the subsequent challenges related to sustaining such a movement and making a democratic impact. Each of the organizations examined here conceives of itself as engaged in this kind of long-term effort. In this endeavor, organizers face three key challenges. These challenges, in turn, demand four specific qualities in the political culture of challenger groups operating in a relatively competitive public arena.

Three Challenges, Four Key Qualities of Internal Political Culture

The first challenge facing such groups is that they must *maintain stability* along two dimensions: organizational continuity and continuity of individual involvement. The importance of organizational stability can best be seen through the insight of the social movements literature: In a classic study, Gamson (1975) concluded that one key to social movement success was simple organizational longevity. As long as an organization could remain in existence and continue making demands, eventually it was likely to gain material concessions and political recognition. The importance of stability of individual involvement flows from the nature of community organizing itself: few of the skills of leading meetings, analyzing political opportunities, and developing political relationships can be taught quickly or in a classroom; gaining these skills requires repeated exposure within the context of real political engagement. If leadership changes frequently, little opportunity exists to draw on the previously gained expertise of past leaders or to develop such skills in inexperienced leaders. Stability in the sense of continuity of leadership allows such cumulative learning.

The need to maintain stability has been treated extensively in the established literature on collective action. On one hand, the resource mobilization literature (Zald and McCarthy 1987; McCarthy and Zald 1977) shows how the problem of organizational continuity can be resolved through resource flows: if the organization can draw on sufficient resources, it is likely to continue to exist. On the other hand, game theory and other rational actor approaches to the problem of continuity of individual involvement (Olson 1965) show how organizations motivate individual involvement by distributing "selective incentives" to participants. Both these approaches offer significant insight into the dilemma of maintaining stability, yet have also been strongly criticized for their one-dimensionally instrumental character and inability to illuminate the experience of those actually engaged in political action. Among the most incisive critiques, Teske's (1997) work among U.S. political activists shows how expressive dimensions of participants' experience become crucial to sustaining mobilization through the process of "identity construction." Yet, for all its insight, in the latter work "identity" largely remains a black box: activists participate because they build identities in which political engagement is fundamental, but how those identities emerge remains opaque.

This study focuses on the middle ground between these approaches: Between expressive identity and instrumental resources lie cultural influences that shape both. Identities are constructed through cultural forces acting upon or being enacted by individuals: what will count as an "incentive" to participate is partly a cultural construction; even the ability to mobilize resources for a given political struggle partly depends on how that struggle is interpreted culturally. These cultural influences come into play both within political organizations and in the wider society, of course; the focus here is on those occurring within the organizations.

The recent literature on organizations and organizational culture provides useful insight. Culturally, what leads to stable, enduring organizations? We know that relational networks provide the key routes along which organizations establish themselves (Granovetter 1985; Zucker 1977). But not all relational networks matter; the networks most capable of lending stability to an incipient organization are networks with high levels of "institutionalized elements," that is, things "about which most individuals and collective actors agree" (Zucker 1988). Institutionalization occurs through a process of common agreement leading actors to perceive the shared cultural elements as "objective," as transcending themselves, and thus as worthy of commitment. Combined with the insights regarding stability and success drawn from Gamson, this Durkheimian process is shown in Figure 2.

shared cultural elements → networks with shared meanings → increased institutionalization
→ organizational stability → increased likelihood of success

Figure 2. Institutionalization of Cultural Elements Leading to Political Success

This suggests that "shared cultural elements" (such things as symbols, paradigmatic figures, rituals, narratives, even language itself) increase the likelihood of a group generating shared meanings to their action, and therefore enduring and perhaps succeeding.[8] That is, organizational culture—not just resource flows, selective incentives, or psychological identity—plays a key role in confronting the challenge of maintaining stability.

But not just any shared cultural elements will do. Some symbols, rituals, and narratives are more valuable than others. We shall see below that this is particularly true for the other challenges facing political organizations. Here, I note only that the organization must elicit from participants sufficiently vibrant commitment to its shared cultural elements to hold the group together during challenges to organizational stability. Vague acceptance of shared symbols or meanings can help a group cohere during calm times, but in the more raucous waters of political engagement, with the constant threat of fragmentation through conflict or dissipation through loss of commitment, more deeply held cultural elements become important for holding a group together. So the group must develop intensely shared cultural elements sufficient for stabilizing the group. Thus, the first key quality of the internal political culture that challenger groups must seek is **high intensity of shared cultural elements**.

The second organizational challenge constantly confronting political organizers is to develop leaders' ability to *accurately interpret their complex political environments*. Political environment here includes all those institutions, politically connected individuals, and issues that an organization might hope to influence. Interpreting that environment includes deciding what alliances to forge, which issues to pursue, what political or business leaders to target, and what information to gather. In short, community organizations must constantly interpret an ever-changing and ambiguous political environment.

The literature on the sociology of organizations provides a sharper perspective for analyzing this aspect of organizational culture. In his seminal work, Karl Weick (1979, elaborated further 1995) suggests that the fundamental challenge which every organization confronts involves interpreting ambiguity. That is, every organization must develop an interpretive framework sufficiently complex and subtle to encompass the ambiguity in its environment. It must match this external ambiguity, then process this ambiguity in coherent fashion in order to know how to take appropriate organizational action.

In the case of community organizing among marginalized populations, the organization's political culture must provide symbols and interpretive frameworks with enough nuance and flexibility to encompass the ambiguous political environment surrounding the organization. Thus, the second key quality of a challenger group's internal political culture is that it must **provide sufficient capacity for ambiguity** to interpret a complex political world.

The third challenge facing political organizations is that they must *act effectively in the public realm*. Participants typically give their time to these organizations because they

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[8] The term "likelihood" here is important: I do not claim that internal culture alone determines an organization's political chances. Rather, cultural dynamics represent structuring tendencies which in a given instance may not solely determine outcomes, but over the course of time greatly shape organizational experience and therefore political development. See Friedland and Alford (1991).

To be successful, challenger groups must necessarily:	generating need for:	Shared culture with specific qualities:
– Maintain stability	→	Intensity of shared cultural elements
– Interpret environment	→	Capacity for ambiguity
– Act effectively to shape public realm	→	Cultural resources for contestation
		Cultural resources for compromise

Figure 3. Political Tasks Leading to Crucial Qualities of Internal Political Culture

want to improve life in their neighborhoods or wider communities. The organization must help them experience a sense of efficacy or they are unlikely to continue giving their time. Shaping public policy is no easy task, but on it depends not only participants' long-term involvement but also continued funding from foundation sources who expect public results from their investment. More critically still, the democratic promise of these organizations rests on this capacity for public action.

Here, the second half of Weick's formulation, regarding the processing of ambiguity, comes to bear. By "processing," Weick means that an organization must not only match its external ambiguity, it must also sustain sufficient internal coherence to understand its options and take effective action within its environment. In the case of challenger political groups, this means the ambiguity inherent in confronting the political realm cannot overwhelm the organization's capacity to act; it must sustain sufficient clarity and coherence to make choices and act vigorously in pursuit of its agenda.

Strongly shared symbols and a high capacity for ambiguity by themselves may help a group endure, but these organizations do not seek simply to endure, they seek to exert political power in favor of the interests of relatively marginalized social groups. Political elites rarely welcome new contenders for political power, so conflicts arise as challenger groups push to overcome entrenched opposition from powerful interests. Thus, the third key quality of the internal political culture of a challenger group is that its organizational culture must provide **cultural resources for contestation** in the social world; that is, reasons for struggling against opposition and for contesting power.[9] Only through such struggle can these marginalized constituencies get to the table of power, where decisions affecting them are made.

The fourth key quality also arises out of this challenge to act effectively in the public realm. Contestation and conflict can get challengers to the table of political power, but once seated there rather different skills are required if an organization wishes to exert influence—or to be invited back. In particular, an organization must be capable of negotiating and trading off some goals over others, that is, of engaging in the dialogical dimension of democratic political life.[10] So the organizational culture of challenger groups must also provide **cultural resources for negotiation and compromise**. Figure 3 summarizes this theoretical argument regarding the cultural basis for projecting social power in a democratic polity.

Christian Smith's (1996a) account of the rise and fall of the Central American peace movement in the United States, though not framed in these theoretical terms, offers empir-

[9] On the general concept of culture as resource, see Swidler (1986); as applied in social movements see Williams (1995); and Williams and Demerath (1991). But the latter work largely sees religion as a source of legitimacy and moral authority, not in the broader theoretical terms outlined here. Kniss (1996) provides useful parsing of the notion of religious ideas and symbols as resources in social conflict.

[10] In this regard, I stand apart from recent studies contending that simply contesting and disrupting power is the best strategy for challenger groups in democratic polities. See for example Piven and Cloward (1977).

ical evidence that these constitute key qualities of the internal political cultures of chal-
lenger groups. Multiple struggles constantly threatened the movement's viability: how to
maintain cultural orientations sufficiently shared to hold the organization together (pp. 219–
23; 408); whether to "play hardball" with Congress or enter into expedient compromises
(pp. 227–30); how to balance members' desire to stay politically virtuous while winning
political battles (pp. 325ff.); and how to interpret the actions of sister organizations, exter-
nal allies, and opponents (*passim*) all emerged repeatedly as challenges within the internal
political cultures of Smith's groups, and threatened their ability to create or take advantage
of political opportunities presented them by U.S. government policy.

   That the theoretical framework elaborated here in the context of studying engagement
in local politics by low-income Americans applies to national-level peace work lends
plausibility to the notion that it may be generalizable—at least to challenger groups seek-
ing to influence decision making in public arenas formally operated under democratic
principles. In such arenas, cultures of democratic contestation face similar dilemmas across
many settings and political levels.

III. CULTURES OF CONTESTATION: THE CASES[11]

I use this theoretical framework to analyze three case studies of church-based community
organizing and one case of multiracial organizing.

St. Elizabeth

St. Elizabeth is a large, Roman Catholic congregation composed primarily of Hispanics
(both citizens and recent immigrants), with a minority population of Irish, Portuguese, and
other working-class groups. Its liturgical life combines fairly traditional religious practices
(most centrally the Eucharist or communion) with more "enthusiastic" expressions from
the Catholic charismatic movement (Neitz 1987). The pastor at the time of the study was
strongly influenced by Catholic social teaching, with its emphasis on social justice, sup-
port of labor, and the Christian responsibility of political participation; he brought this
formation to bear prominently in his teaching and preaching.[12]

   All four key features of organizational culture are highly developed at St. Elizabeth
Church. The least obvious is the intensity of engagement with the church's main cultural
elements: the symbols, music, and rituals of the worship. Although services are quite well
attended, there is little of the publicly shared emotionality of worship that we shall see at
the other two churches; there is little display of affective fervor by individuals, nor any
verbal call-and-response interaction between preacher and congregation. But compared to
typical Hispanic Catholic religious services, evidence abounds of significant religious
intensity at St. Elizabeth. This evidence includes widespread participation in the commu-
nion ritual and in singing (compared to most traditional Catholic churches in this culture);
the presence of an active minority of "charismatic Catholics"[13] holding regular meetings;
and the fervent prayers led by laypeople at the start of organizing meetings. Thus, the
surface quiescence at this church shrouds a significant level of religious intensity.

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[11] The following material summarizes an argument made in greater depth in a forthcoming book manuscript. It
must be presented briefly in the present paper.
   [12] Official Catholic and mainline Protestant teaching regarding these kinds of issues remains little recognized
among secular academicians; for the former, see Castelli (1983); Gannon (1987); and Coleman (1991).
   [13] The charismatic movement operates across nearly all Protestant denominations and the Catholic Church. It
emphasizes personal reception of the "gifts of the Holy Spirit" (similar to Pentecostalism) and prayer practices
more externally effusive than traditionally found in these denominations (Neitz 1987).

The high capacity for ambiguity present in St. Elizabeth's religious culture was shown most prominently in Sunday sermons. These rarely presented a cut-and-dried, black-and-white moral interpretation of the world. Rather, they often strove to provide moral insight and clarity precisely in the context of, and by acknowledging, the complexity of members' lives. Thus, one sermon addressed how members relate to authority figures; the pastor questioned **both** the Catholic tendency toward subservience before authority (in the Church and in the wider world) **and** the knee-jerk rejection of authority that characterizes parts of American culture. Instead, he promoted a more nuanced stance vis-à-vis authority figures in both Church and society, encouraging members both to assess such figures critically and to accept their authority when exercised legitimately.

This teaching represents an application of the broader theological stance of this congregation, which pragmatically affirms the existence of both good and evil in the world. This affirmation carries important implications for political engagement: denying the possibility of worldly goodness or seeing the world as irredeemably "fallen," as some religious interpretations do, gives believers little incentive to engage in worldly reform efforts. On the other hand, denying the existence of evil in the world may also diminish political engagement in two ways: first, it removes a powerful potential motivator of this-worldly engagement—if nothing is evil, why struggle against it?; second, it denies political participants a rich reservoir of interpretive meaning when they confront the betrayal, corruption, or sheer egoism sometimes found in political life.

In place of either of these alternatives, seeing the world as a kind of dramatic stage on which good and evil struggle (as many of the world's religious traditions do) makes this-worldly involvement crucial: it is here that believers' actions matter, for themselves, others, and the world. Political engagement built on such a religious ethos, of course, has led to both admirable and despicable religious politics. What cannot be denied is that it provides adherents with powerful motivation for engaging in politics, and interpretive resources for making sense of that engagement (Walzer 1965, Hill 1972). St. Elizabeth's religious culture presents members with precisely such an ethos.

This ethos of good and evil can be presented in various ways. Below, we will see it presented elsewhere in a highly individualistic and chiliastic mode, with rigid dividing lines between those who are saved/good and those who are unsaved/evil. At St. Elizabeth, this ethos was presented rather differently. First, the interplay between good and evil was seen as occurring not just within individuals and regarding issues of individual morality, but also in society and regarding social issues such as inequality and race relations. Second, discussions at St. Elizabeth often revolved around the need to **discern** the dividing line between good and evil. Potential political allies were never assessed according to whether they were personally Christian/Catholic or not, but according to whether their priorities were consonant with Catholic social teaching regarding human dignity, social justice, the rights of labor, the responsibilities of capital, and political democracy. Likewise, issues were discussed according to their foreseeable long-term impact on the neighborhood and city, rather than on their face-value morality. For example, the planned construction of a major retail center in the neighborhood was the object of extensive discussion: did it represent corporate intrusion that would erode the sense of local community, or a source of jobs that would help sustain the well-being of the community? The organizing committee, steeped in this congregation's culture, tended to approach the uncertainties of organizing quite pragmatically, on a case-by-base basis—with each case evaluated in part under the lens of an egalitarian reading of the Christian ethical tradition.

Thus, in a variety of ways, the religious culture at St. Elizabeth presented extensive resources for building a complex political culture within the organizing work, allowing participants to recognize, interpret, and confront the highly ambiguous political world around them.

Finally, the internal culture at St. Elizabeth provided a coherent basis for engaging in political conflict. The worship service explicitly identified social realities demanding political solutions, connected Jesus (the central symbolic figure of the service) to those issues, and legitimated believers' engagement in seeking solutions. The pastor legitimated "naming names" in a conflictive style when political or business interests appeared to diverge from those of the local community. He legitimated such conflict both by highlighting Jesus' own conflicts with the economic, political, and religious interests of his own society (Bravo 1986), and by personally confronting business and political elites when they failed to take the community's needs into account in their decision making.

But this legitimation of necessary conflict was never carried over into *carte blanche* legitimation of pursuing conflict for its own sake. Authorities were never presented as evil or corrupt simply by virtue of being elites. Indeed, the pastor explicitly called on congregation members to recognize the legitimate exercise of authority by political leaders, even while charging them with keeping these elites "accountable to the community." In this way, religious culture in this setting also legitimated compromise and constructive negotiation with other interests.

In constructing its political culture on the basis of the cultural dynamics outlined here, St. Elizabeth has built the strongest local organizing unit within PICO's Oakland federation (itself a leading political force within Oakland's civil society, certainly the most prominent force representing low- and moderate-income neighborhoods), while by itself drawing between 300 and 500 participants to various neighborhood and citywide actions. It has helped advance police reform and community policing; raised public lighting standards in poor neighborhoods; provided key leaders and large numbers of participants for PICO's successful campaigns for smaller class sizes and better wages in public schools; and successfully targeted Montgomery Ward corporation to re-develop a large abandoned building in the heart of their neighborhood. This last fight, in particular, shows the political capacity of St. Elizabeth's organizing effort (and the strength of the religiously constructed political culture underlying it): it required an organizing drive sustained over several years to pressure Montgomery Ward directly and to work through city government to exert political leverage on them indirectly. Since private corporations are structurally shielded from this kind of organizing pressure, they have rarely responded positively to it. Yet PICO's organizing efforts at St. Elizabeth successfully convinced them to do so.[14]

Thus, St. Elizabeth's worship services built a congregation of members sharing a commitment to a cultural tradition. By giving ethical sanction to conflictive relations with political officials, the religious interpretation of the world at St. Elizabeth provided cultural underpinning for projecting organizational power onto the terrain of the political system. By forcefully advocating the ethical limits on such conflictive relations and legitimizing political leadership and compromise, it also projected that organizational power in such a way that it could constructively shape the local political process and city policy. Together, these cultural factors helped PICO build a local organizing committee with a demonstrated political capacity outstripping any other comparable civic force in Oakland.

Full Gospel

Full Gospel Church is a large, primarily African American congregation that worships in the Pentecostal tradition (Cox 1995) and is affiliated with the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), a black Pentecostal denomination. Its worship life includes live gospel music, praying in tongues, "altar calls," and expressive dancing. The pastor at the time of this

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[14]Demolition began in early 1996, but as of this writing was being held up by legal challenges filed by a historic preservationist group.

study was known as a "powerful preacher"; he emphasized individual moral renewal and "salvation in Christ." But the church pursued a broader social strategy as well, under the theme "Taking the City for Jesus Christ," which appeared on a large banner over the altar and thus framed the congregation's entire worship life. Like the other two churches, it is located in an economically blighted section of the city.

Full Gospel Church shares some features with St. Elizabeth, especially in the role it serves in members' lives. Interviewees from both congregations expressed a deep sense of their bonds within the worshiping community being central to their lives. As moral communities, both congregations help their members establish social connections, meaningful direction, and a sense of relatedness to a reality transcending their immediate confines; both also serve as bulwarks of stability and communal focus in neighborhoods in which residents often feel unsafe, vulnerable, and isolated.

These two churches are also similar in one facet of their organizational cultures: both construct among a significant portion of congregation members a strong commitment to shared cultural elements. Indeed, the religious culture at Full Gospel may be more intense in its fervor and raw power to elicit commitment than the cultures of any of the other Oakland churches—at least, that is suggested by Full Gospel's astounding growth over the last ten years, from a small storefront congregation to one with weekly attendances among the largest in the city.

But Full Gospel Church contrasts starkly with St. Elizabeth in the other facets of its organizational culture examined here. Full Gospel did successfully transform Pentecostalism's traditional other-worldliness in order to justify this-worldly activism, by interpreting the slogan "Taking the City for Jesus Christ" specifically in social and structural terms. But in its sharp division of the world into the "saved" and "unsaved," its relatively rigid church/world boundary (Douglas [1970] 1996), and its identification of the concept of evil with a rather narrowly conceived set of practices of personal immorality, Full Gospel's religious culture presented two difficulties to successful political organizing. First, just where this activism was to be exercised remained unclear: even after forming explicitly to work with PICO, the organizing committee debated whether to apply its mandate to "family issues" by linking up with the Christian Coalition, or to the neighborhood, economic, and educational issues typically the focus of PICO. In other words, this-worldly commitment was only ambiguously attached to the socioeconomic issues that provided a clear focus at St. Elizabeth.

Second, Full Gospel's religious culture offered its members remarkably thin resources for matching the complexities and ambiguities "out there" in the social world. In essence, two lines starkly divide good and evil for this congregation. One line runs between individuals: people are either good by virtue of being "saved," or are presumed to be immersed in evil. The other line runs between this congregation (perhaps extending out to like-minded congregations) and the rest of the social world: institutions controlled by this church or staffed by its members are embraced, while all other institutions (including government) are suspect.

This rigid division arising from Full Gospel's organizational culture gave its organizing committee little capacity for ambiguity in confronting an uncertain and equivocal political environment. For example, political figures were frequently assessed in terms of whether they were "really Christian," and questions were raised by committee members as to whether the organizing effort was "following Jesus, or following PICO," whether its direction was "scriptural or PICO's?"[15] Tellingly, when the organizing committee encountered a city

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[15] Of course the latter question could be a way of using religious language to raise appropriate questions about the ethical basis of organizing; however, at Full Gospel the resulting discussion focused not on such concerns but

leader who used Christian language to identify his priorities and was himself an active evangelical Christian, but who essentially stonewalled their requests for collaboration, they were stymied: the cultural categories through which they viewed the world could not encompass the ambiguities of confronting a political authority who could talk their talk but refused to coordinate politically with them.

Furthermore, although its sense of evil in the social world provided powerful **motivation** to reform the city, Full Gospel's organizational culture was relatively inconsistent with the political tasks this required. Its extreme individualism encouraged believers to pay attention primarily to their own moral status and secondarily to the internal moral status of others, rather than to broader societal issues.[16] Also, while its delegitimation of governmental institutions fostered an aggressive oppositional posture which could be politically useful (witness the recent success of some forces in the Christian Right), this assumption of evil intent on the part of government and other outsiders did not lend itself well to the kind of compromise and give-and-take needed in political negotiation. After all, if the world is a dramatic stage on which good and evil struggle to the death, and if government is steeped in evil, why should one compromise or collaborate with government?

Finally, Full Gospel's religious culture promoted an unquestioning stance toward authority within the congregation that did not translate easily into a critical stance vis-à-vis political authorities outside the church. That is, in the rare instances when the organizing committee at Full Gospel Church had personal contact with an elected or appointed city leader, they so deferred to the latter's authority that they were unable to "hold them accountable," in the parlance of community organizing.

Notice that the last two points seem contradictory: How can an "oppositional posture" toward government coexist with an uncritical stance toward political authorities, and how do both arise within the same organizational culture? This apparent contradiction must be understood as part of the disjuncture between what we might call the institutional analysis promoted at Full Gospel and the day-to-day experience of members there. The institutional analysis embedded in the church's preaching, prayers, and theological assumptions indeed delegitimated current political authority—that is why the church yearns to "take the city." But the Pentecostal tradition of strong pastoral authority meant that the day-to-day encounters of members within the church provided them with little actual experience of questioning authority when facing it personally. So institutional delegitimation of government actually combined rather seamlessly with uncritical personal acceptance of political authority.

In arguing that Full Gospel's religious culture undermined the church's ability to engage in the political tasks of community organizing, I do not want to suggest that these difficulties arose as a *necessary* product of Full Gospel's "other-worldliness." Rather, they arose due to the way that the transcendent realm was understood at Full Gospel and the way it was connected back to this-worldly reality: the vivid experience of Jesus and the Spirit that the worship service made available to members is "tied back" historically and scripturally to images of Jesus as personal healer and moral judge, with little sense of Jesus as a social prophet who denounced societal exploitation and elite hypocrisy. Even the "Kingdom of God" image was interpreted in terms of individual psychological healing,

on whether PICO as an extra-ecclesial institution was legitimate at all. Although collaboration with PICO continued at some level, that this debate occurred and was not really resolved reflects Full Gospel's narrowly structured internal culture.

    [16]Note that if a person's moral status were understood partly in terms of whether the person participated in efforts to improve communal life, this conception might actually undergird political participation. But at Full Gospel, it is not understood in this way.

rather than in the terms of social justice and political reality that it also makes available, as seen at St. Elizabeth.[17]

As a result of these difficulties, the organizing effort at Full Gospel was markedly unsuccessful in either winning its own local issues or in mobilizing its members for the citywide issues that PICO won during this period. In fact, though monthly organizing meetings were held and the members occasionally met with city officials to begin to research and define an issue, these meetings generated such uncertainty regarding goals that the group never actually convinced a public official to come before them and commit to a given course of action. That is to say, Full Gospel never won an issue on its own. In addition, though the church did turn out members for citywide Oakland actions on street lighting, public education, and other issues, it did so only marginally: one of the three largest churches in the city, it never turned out more than two dozen members to these citywide events attended by 900 to 2,000 people. St. Elizabeth, a church of comparable size, generally turned out several hundred to these events. Gradually, the organizing effort dissipated for lack of interest and amid frustration at having accomplished little. The participants simply could not construct a political culture that would be both meaningful for them and effective in the public realm.

St. Columba

St. Columba is a medium-sized, mixed-race Roman Catholic congregation (more than half African American, a third white, with smaller Filipino and Latino components). Its primary worship services combine core elements of Roman Catholicism (especially Mass centered on the Eucharist) with elements from African American Christianity and strongly Afro-centric symbolism. Afro-centric symbolic elements include *kente* cloth vestments and altar decorations, an African image of Jesus on the cross, African drums played during the service, and some incorporation of dance into religious worship. Elements from African American Christianity include stronger, more emotive preaching than is often the case in Catholic churches, and a gospel music choir providing a central focus to the service.

With regard to the intensity of cultural elements shared across the congregation, St. Columba represented a rather complex mixture. The church's primary worship service was renowned in African American Catholic circles, with the African and African American elements combined to construct an intense worship experience. Members spoke in interviews of the way the services engaged them on esthetic, affective, intellectual, and spiritual levels. Yet this worship service does not tell the whole story. Attendance was by far the largest at this Afro-centric service, but two other Masses were held each weekend at the parish. About a quarter of the total congregation attended the other two Masses, which were far more traditional, at times celebrated without music. Among these latter members were people (many of them older African-Americans shaped in the traditional black Catholic culture of Louisiana, but also others, both black and white) who did not identify with and/or actively disliked the Afro-centric emphasis at St. Columba. When the pastor departed from the congregation partway through this study, the split between these two groups led to dissension and polarization within the congregation—a conflict that paralyzed the organizing effort there. Thus, on the first dimension of organizational culture, St. Columba can best be characterized as having a majority with intensely shared cultural elements, fused with a minority sharply divided from that majority.

The organizational culture at St. Columba displayed a high capacity for facing ambiguity, the second dimension. The church promoted a fundamental religious identity that

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[17]Many scripture scholars argue that interpreting the "Kingdom of God" image without such this-worldly social and political referents does violence to it. See Marcus Borg (1984) and Richard Cassidy (1978).

understood members as immersed in God's love, yet never beyond the attractions of evil. The richly evocative music that structured the whole worship service sang repeatedly of the intimate love that Jesus, "the Lord," or God holds for each person, yet the parish's official mission statement identified members "as sinners ourselves"; this self-understanding as flawed-but-loved persons was reinforced regularly during worship services. Thus, in spite of a superficially similar worship style, St. Columba's religious culture contrasted sharply with that of Full Gospel. This contrast partly reflects differing Pentecostal and Catholic theological commitments, of course: Full Gospel divided individuals sharply between the "saved" and "unsaved," whereas St. Columba's organizational culture also promoted a vivid sense of good and evil in the world, but drew a line between good and evil running down the middle of each individual. Each person in the organization and in the outside world was seen as fundamentally good and "created in God's image," yet as capable of engaging in both good **and** evil.

However, it is not theology in the sense of disembodied ideas that matters so much here, but rather the fact that those ideas are enacted through ritual practices that shape individual identities and collective worldviews. Such ritual enactment, when entered into fervently by believers, shapes the assumptions and affective ties at work among them by inscribing differing symbolic commitments into the "selves" engaging in political organizing. The symbolic commitments ritualized at St. Columba's led members to approach others (committee members, potential allies, political officials, etc.) pragmatically, recognizing in them the potential for both good and evil. Individuals were therefore assessed on the basis of what they could contribute to the organization's efforts in a given area, and their integrity in doing so—rather than prejudged according to their status in a moral hierarchy of salvation. PICO organizers could then draw on this reservoir of symbolic commitments to construct a political culture capable of confronting ambiguity in the organization's political environment.

As a result, whereas Full Gospel divided the world into godly institutions associated with the church and suspect institutions beyond, at St. Columba government and other extra-ecclesial institutions were neither assumed to be illegitimate nor embraced unquestioningly. Institutions were assessed gradually during the course of learning more about them, rather than judged according to predetermined categories not reflective of the ambiguity surrounding the organization.

In theory, St. Columba's strong sense of ambiguity in individuals and institutions might have been part of an organizational culture strongly coherent with the political tasks of community organizing. Its powerful invocation of a transcendent dimension to human experience, combined with explicit drawing-out in sermons of the social and political implications of the church's understanding of God's will, were clearly consonant with political engagement. Likewise, its understanding of Jesus' life, vision of the Kingdom of God as partly a social utopia in this world, and invocation of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks as paradigmatic figures for Christians all explicitly connected religious faith to this-worldly work for justice.

But in practice St. Columba's religious culture had difficulty sustaining this work. As noted above, pursuing such work for justice in the context of current American economic and political conditions demands a willingness to enter into contestation and conflict with social elites. That is, it requires insight into and acceptance of the conflictive dimension of public life. But the overall organizational culture at St. Columba, imbued with a strong strand of therapeutic culture (see Bellah et al. 1985) provided few resources that justified or made sense of conflict within relationships. This aversion to contestation, and thus to the conflictive side of political culture, was reinforced in the organizing effort by the pastor's desire to avoid offending political leaders.

For example, in 1994 the local organizing committee at the church tried to convince the mayor to support changes in police practices in the area, but were repeatedly rebuffed. Eventually, they convinced her to attend a public action, at which they hoped to change her mind by confronting her with the situation in their neighborhoods; residents were to bear witness to the fear with which they lived and argue that current police practices— supported by the mayor—were partly responsible in that they failed to address street intimidation in poor neighborhoods. This promised to be a fairly conflictive encounter, the local organizing committee's first taste of public confrontation. Leaders were nervous in the days leading up to the action, anxious at the prospect of public conflict with the legit- imate authority embodied in the mayor. The PICO organizer worked actively to redirect this anxiety back into legitimate political conflict by drawing on leaders' anger at the mayor's repeated rebuffs toward them.

But less than an hour before the action, as leaders were engaged in last-minute prepa- rations, the pastor intervened unilaterally to say he would "not tolerate" any disrespectful behavior toward the mayor. Although it is no doubt possible to engage in political conflict while remaining respectful, the leaders interpreted this intervention to mean they should avoid any public conflict. The pastor's discrediting of contestation took the wind out of the leaders' preparations and actively undermined the organizing effort. Leaders later charac- terized the emotional tenor of the ensuing meeting as "flat," with the mayor allowed to avoid either committing to or clearly opposing their call for changes in police tactics.

The cultural resources for compromise and negotiation at St. Columba's were much stronger. Indeed, the organizing effort's difficulties with contestation can be seen as the product of the leaders' and pastor's strong desire for constructive relationships with polit- ical authorities. However, in its aversion to conflict—the lifeblood of local politics and of the community organizing models analyzed here—this religious congregation allowed itself to be manipulated by those very political authorities it sought to influence.

In this regard, St. Columba provided a cultural base that was somewhat incoherent— partially consistent, partially inconsistent—with democratic engagement in the public arena. As a result, the PICO organizing effort there witnessed some success: they brought city officials in for two public actions at which the latter committed to supporting them on several issues, and turned out some 60-80 parish members for two of the citywide PICO actions during the course of this study. Yet these successes never coalesced into the kind of dynamic, cumulative organizing effort that occurred at St. Elizabeth: the committee repeat- edly bogged down in discussions about the acceptability of conflict with political leaders and other internal matters. This lack of strong models for constructive conflict led to great difficulty in the church. When a change of pastors raised issues about the church's future direction, members found no way to mediate their internal conflicts; for over a year, the congregation was racked by internal division, as such conflicts festered. Ultimately, the organizing effort broke apart on the shoals of these internal divisions.

CTWO

The Center for Third World Organizing represents an important comparative case, in that it organizes in the same neighborhoods and political environment as PICO, but separately and under a nonreligious cultural strategy.

The organizational culture in CTWO's "multiracial organizing" model (see Anner 1996) displayed great complexity regarding the four key facets examined here. A core group comprised of staff and a few key leaders shared an intense commitment to a composite set of paradigmatic figures, political ideals, and vision of a multiracial American society. Furthermore, they and most CTWO constituents shared experiences of racism and mar-

ginalization in American society, which served the organization as a key source in consti-
tuting a common identity.

But CTWO faced a dilemma: many potential participants appear to be far more rooted
in and committed to their own ethnic cultures than to the multiracial culture of CTWO.
The organizational multiracial culture appears to them not as a "shared culture," but rather
as an amalgam of diverse cultural elements, some of which they embrace and others they
reject or keep at arm's length.[18] The intensity of shared elements across the overall orga-
nization was thus fairly low, while within the core group it was fairly high.

Similarly, CTWO displayed an uneven capacity for facing the ambiguity of its political
environment. On one hand, its organizers and leaders sometimes dealt with that ambiguity
in very sophisticated ways. That is, CTWO sustained constructive relations with official
representatives within the police department, city government, and so on, even while engag-
ing in highly confrontational relations with other actors within the same institutions. On
the other hand, its cultural resources for making sense of this ambiguity were more limited.
Its organizational culture emphasized a salient division between "dominant institutions"
and "subaltern institutions" (the latter term used by some of the more formally educated
CTWO staff). "Dominant institutions" included all institutions affiliated with government
and, in the organization's highly racialized world view, all those led by white elites. "Sub-
altern institutions" appeared to include organizations led by people of color whose social
analysis emphasized the dimensions of race, class, and gender. This distinction functioned
culturally, though not politically, in ways similar to Full Gospel's categorization of insti-
tutions as "under the influence" of Satan or of God. In both cases, the sharp distinction
undermined the organizations' capacity for ambiguity in facing their political environ-
ments, by eliminating or making more difficult collaboration with potential allies not "saved"
by sharing the right religious identity (at Full Gospel) or the right political analysis and
racial identity (at CTWO).

CTWO dealt with this difficulty more successfully than Full Gospel. But the fact that
this tension was embedded in the core categories of CTWO's political culture meant that it
required ongoing staff attention and could never be fully resolved. The understandings of
racial identity available to CTWO staff as cultural elements "out there" in the American
social world simply did not incorporate sufficient complexity and ambiguity to build an
organizational culture more effective in this regard. That CTWO managed to operate rel-
atively effectively in spite of this limitation testifies to its organizers' deft use of what
cultural categories are available ("people of color," "communities of color," "dominant
institutions," etc.). But the underlying cultural realities—rigid racial/ethnic categories
arising from America's racialized history, combined with the language of "dominant insti-
tutions" coding for institutions believed to serve the interests of the dominant racial major-
ity, regardless of the racial identity of those leading them—exerted a logic of their own.

This logic was shown most clearly in CTWO's "asset forfeiture" campaign. "Asset
forfeiture" is a legal process whereby law enforcement agencies claim ownership of assets
such as cars or other property either used in commission of a crime or purchased through

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[18]Note that PICO faces a similar dilemma: even the various Christian traditions present in the organization hold
extremely diverse symbolic emphases, cultural styles, and understandings of what it means to be Christian.
Furthermore, they incorporate a level of ethnic diversity equal to that in CTWO (albeit with a stronger presence
of whites and a weaker presence of Asian immigrants). But PICO has recourse to two strategies to resolve this
dilemma: first, although some of its member churches are quite interracial, others are quite homogenous; the
organization's structure thus allows those more comfortable within their own ethnic culture to focus on organiz-
ing there, while still drawing them into interracial collaboration on the citywide level. In addition, PICO can draw
on overarching symbolic elements and religious practices shared across even the most diverse Christian denom-
inations and congregations: God, Jesus, prayer, song, and so on. The latter strategy becomes more complicated in
PICO federations (Orange County, New Orleans, and elsewhere) incorporating Jewish synagogues, Unitarian
congregations, or others for whom Jesus-centered language is unacceptable.

illicit drug profits. The receiving law enforcement agency must share such assets, or their cash equivalent, with other local groups. During the course of this study, CTWO organized a campaign to force the Oakland Police Department (OPD, whose chief was African American) to accept CTWO as its primary partner in determining what social service agencies would receive these asset forfeiture funds. While successful in the short term—CTWO indeed became the key community representative in the forfeited asset distribution process— CTWO was unable to convert this success into constructive relations with the OPD for its other campaigns: from the point of view of key OPD community relations representatives, CTWO was simply too confrontational to treat constructively. As one high-ranking OPD officer who had contact with the organization during this period put it, "They're just not worth dealing with. It's too conflictive, too much trouble. I don't mind working with people who don't particularly like the police, but there's gotta be some give-and-take. They just think we're the bad guy."

CTWO's organizational culture has been constructed quite directly to address the political tasks the organization faces. As a result, on one level it was quite coherent with those tasks: its sharp distinctions between the white elite and people of color and between dominant and subaltern institutions, its history and ethos of conflict-driven political organizing, and the priority it places on "direct action" as a political strategy all gave CTWO powerful resources for contesting power in the public realm.

But on another level, the fact that CTWO's internal culture held official institutions suspect, and showed a certain contempt for the compromises made by officeholders within those institutions, presented obstacles to constructive negotiation and compromise. Thus, even their erstwhile allies resented their tactics. As one Oakland political aide noted: "[CTWO] seems to do confrontation above everything else. They pushed through the police reform work, and [a specific city council member] sponsored some amendments that would really reform the police department. But then CTWO pushed so hard, kept saying it wasn't enough, that he just said 'forget it' and walked out of the room."

In spite of such tensions, CTWO's organizing efforts did give its members access to political elites, and the organization did negotiate successfully with those elites on some significant issues. Yet, their ties to these elites remained quite politically or ethically dubious in the minds of participants: in "backstage" conversations, members often belittled the very leaders with whom they were striving to form alliances, and expressed reservations about those alliances. While similar self-questioning also went on among PICO leaders, these discussions more clearly articulated reasons why such alliances were a good idea—they succeeded in making moral sense of a political necessity. In contrast, CTWO members found it harder to make sense of the same experience: they saw the political necessity of forging such alliances, but felt morally dubious in doing so—for reasons rooted in the sharp distinctions cited above. The only place in PICO that similar cultural dynamics occurred was at Full Gospel Church, with a paradoxically similar organizational culture in this regard.

As a result of these dynamics, the organization was forced to spend large amounts of time negotiating the cultural complexities cited here: the tension between an intensely shared commitment to a multiracial culture among core staff and leaders, and a stronger commitment to specific ethnic cultures among new members; the ambiguity produced when CTWO's organizational culture, depicting official institutions as one-dimensionally corrupt, found it necessary to collaborate with those institutions; the difficulty of heightening the conflict with dominant elites, then compromising with them to attain organizational goals. All these sapped significant organizational focus and energy over the course of CTWO's organizing efforts.

Notably, decision makers in city government recognized these struggles. In interviews, they spoke of dealing with CTWO as "a pain in the ass," since "you never know how

Table 1. Cultural Traits and Expected Political Capacity of Selected
Organizing Committees

	St. Elizabeth	Full Gospel	St. Columba	CTWO
Intensity of Shared Elements	+	++	+/–	+/–
Capacity for Ambiguity	+	–	++	+/–
Cultural resources for contestation	+	+/–	–	++
Cultural resources for compromise	++	+/–	++	+/–
Expected political capacity	High	Low	Moderate	Low-moderate
Observed political capacity	High	Low	Low-moderate	High-moderate

they're going to approach you, as friend or foe." Although this tension with city officials no doubt kept CTWO from being co-opted, this only served the organization's political capacity if those same officials were obliged by the organization's strength to continue negotiating with its leadership. At no point during this study was CTWO able to bring more than 100 people into a room for a political action; hostile political leaders could therefore shun the organization when they chose. As a result, CTWO's significant political victories never coalesced sufficiently to enable the organization to project power at the level of St. Elizabeth's organizing effort.

Yet over the course of several years, CTWO won significant successes in the political arena. In addition to winning the distribution of asset forfeiture monies to community organizations that were its own allies, the organization's Oakland project won heightened protection and testing for lead poisoning among urban youth, and new school nutrition programs. Thus, appealing to racial identity as a primary cultural base for democratic engagement brings both strengths and significant dilemmas into the effort to construct an effective political culture. On one hand, in the highly racialized context of American society, racial identities are often strongly held and thus capable of motivating vigorous political engagement. On the other hand, a cultural strategy based on racial identity runs the risk of undermining democratic organizing in two ways: by diminishing the organization's interpretive resources for facing the ambiguity in its environment, and by undermining participants' willingness to compromise and find the powerful allies needed for a successful fight. American history and culture make race a key site of social conflict, yet provide only very thin nonreligious, cross-racial cultural resources for engaging in that conflict. The distortions of America's racialized past and present continue to burden all players in the political arena, not least those struggling to overcome it.[19]

Summary: Organizational Culture and Democratic Effectiveness in Four Cases

Table 1 summarizes the four facets of organizational culture discussed within each organizing effort, using a simple scheme to indicate facets highly conducive (++), moderately conducive (+), or not conducive (–) to political engagement in the public realm. Where these factors are especially mixed, the table indicates this (+/–). The table also suggests

[19] An anonymous reviewer at *Sociological Theory* makes the important point that the universalist thrust of most Christian traditions today legitimates relations with out-groups, and that racial or ethnic consciousness sometimes lacks such universalism. See Wood (1995) for some implicit discussion of this theme, which deserves fuller treatment. I focus here on the cultural dynamics through which such universalism makes a democratic difference.

what political capacity one might expect based on this analysis of the political culture underlying each organizing effort, and the actual political capacity observed.

The political capacities expected as a result of this analysis closely match the actual fruits born of their efforts: St. Elizabeth Church demonstrates the strongest political capacity in having won the most substantial and politically complex issues, having sustained community organizing over the longest period, and having turned out the most members for actions. Full Gospel Church shows the lowest political capacity, in having been unsuccessful in winning specific issues, seen its organizing effort wither after only two years, and turned out less than two dozen members at its height. St. Columba and CTWO both demonstrate moderate political capacity through their success in winning issues, sustaining the organizing, and turning out members. This overall pattern strongly supports the theoretical framework developed here for analyzing the organizational cultures of political organizations.

But within the "moderate" political capacity, the actual outcomes at St. Columba and CTWO reverse the outcomes predicted purely on the basis of this analysis of political culture: that analysis suggests CTWO should have been less successful than PICO's St. Columba unit, when in fact it was somewhat more successful. Thus, explaining these outcomes requires going beyond the analysis of political culture.

I would account for this anomaly as follows: CTWO has managed to sustain its organizing effort more successfully than St. Columba, and more successfully than its internal political culture would predict, for at least two key reasons. First, it concentrates a high level of resources on a relatively small organizing team; indeed, the financial resources CTWO dedicates to organizing in Oakland are comparable to those of PICO's entire Oakland effort, and dwarf those that PICO can dedicate to St. Columba alone. While both CTWO and PICO employ talented staff organizers, CTWO's attentions can be more narrowly focused due to its smaller scale.[20] Second, it is more autonomous organizationally than PICO's St. Columba effort: thus, it was not pulled down by crises within its sponsoring institution, as occurred when the organizing effort at St. Columba fell prey to the turmoil of the church at large. Although organizational crises occurred within CTWO, staff could devote itself nearly full-time to trouble-shooting these internal crises, thus preventing them from stopping the organizing altogether.

Thus, the theoretical framework proposed here is not imperialistic: political culture does not unilaterally determine organizational outcomes, but provides powerful structuring tendencies shaping those outcomes. Alongside this cultural structure, factors including resource flows, organizational structure, and the agency of leaders continue to exert autonomous influences of their own. But analyzing political organizing without paying attention to the construction of political culture runs a risk of missing a great deal of the action.

IV. CONCLUSION

This causal autonomy [of cultural dynamics] in turn allows, even mandates, a central role for culture in structuring political outcomes. . . . By existing as something apart from either the economy or the state, a political culture, when *acted upon*, will shape the outcome, the meaning, and the very course of political action and social processes. (Somers 1995b: 132, 134, emphasis in original)

[20] This means that the more direct comparison between the overall Oakland efforts of CTWO and PICO (rather than CTWO's overall effort to just one local organizing committee of PICO's Oakland work) yields a one-sided result: the two citywide organizations draw on comparable resources, but PICO parlays these resources into significantly greater political influence. See Wood (1995) for fuller discussion.

This article began by asking what religion contributes to sustaining the democratic public realm of American society, noting that recent scholarship has shown various ways that religious institutions *qua* institutions do so. In keeping with Somers's emphasis on the causal autonomy of culture, this article focused instead on what religion *qua* religious culture may contribute. By controlling through research design the factors of material resources and political opportunity, it isolated for analytic purposes the cultural dynamics within democratic movements.[21] In extending recent work on religion in social movements, on the political culture of democratic engagement, and on the cultural underpinnings of the public sphere, it strove simultaneously to use new conceptual insights to illuminate the challenges that face democratic movements in contemporary America, and to provide a stronger theoretical account of just how political cultures shape political outcomes.

On the basis of this analysis, I argue that the content of an organization's culture matters greatly for political action, but in subtle and complex ways.[22] For example, "religious culture" in general does not necessarily enable **or** inhibit democratic political organizing. Rather, certain forms of religious culture—like certain forms of any culture—enable such participation, and other forms of religious or secular culture constrain it. To understand the complex dynamics of political culture, cultural analysts must stay grounded within the concrete social settings in which political action occurs.

More generally, to provide an adequate cultural foundation for motivating and sustaining political participation, the organizational culture of challenger groups must: (1) engage participants in ways vigorous enough to elicit their communal commitment and engagement, and thus help maintain organizational stability; (2) offer resources for interpreting an ambiguous political world; and (3) do both of the above in a way consonant with contesting power through political conflict **and** subsequently engaging in compromise and negotiation. Laying such a cultural foundation is no mean task; where religious culture lends itself towards such a combination, it provides powerful cultural resources for democratic politics. But, of course, not all religion does so.

Second, whether political organizers can construct such a cultural foundation lies not just in their own hands, but depends crucially upon cultural work done in sites far outside the political arena. Given Americans' high levels of engagement in religion, among the most important such sites are churches, synagogues, mosques, and other houses of worship. Analysis of the political culture of democratic organizing must focus not just internally, but also transinstitutionally—particularly within the religious institutions in which so many Americans participate. In those institutions, vivid affirmation of the reality of good and evil appears to help make worship meaningful and engaging in ways not available to a strongly relativistic stance. "Vivid affirmation" sometimes becomes simplistic interpretation, but not necessarily: a culture that understands good and evil complexly, as potentials in every person, lends itself to sophisticated interpretation of the political world, whereas conceptualizing good and evil in absolute terms as "us" and "them" tends strongly

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[21] This work follows Somers (1995b:130ff.) in emphasizing this as an *analytic* autonomy, not a *concrete/empirical* autonomy. That is, cultural dynamics overlap with and operate within other concrete processes such as the dynamics of resource flows, political opportunities, and strategic calculation that also influence political outcomes. By designing this research to analytically isolate the cultural dynamics, I strive here to gain analytic leverage for understanding them; at the same time, in contrast to some cultural studies, I strive to locate the cultural dynamics very much within the social process of organizing and its political environment.

[22] Cultural content here includes both what Wendy Griswold (1987) and Robert Wuthnow (1987) call the internal structure of the cultural object and the active elaboration and interpretation of cultural objects by participants in the organization. That is, some aspects of cultural content come already determined by adoption of a cultural strategy, but participants preserve extensive freedom to re-fashion that content through "culture work"–see Hart (1992, forthcoming); another example of this kind of culture work is in Williams and Demerath (1991).

toward simplistic political interpretation.[23] In this way, religious commitment to a transcendent dimension of human life may lead either to escapism or to strong ethical leverage against the status quo—that is, it may lead to political quietism or to motivation for political transformation. Some religious congregations construct the worship experience with other-worldly dimensions that eviscerate political engagement; but others tie that transcendent dimension back to this world in powerful ways, with different political repercussions.

Third, each of the alternative Christian interpretations examined here (and by extension probably the major strands of the world religions in general) offers cultural resources for political engagement. But the historical importance of evangelical forms of religion in America has moved the "religious marketplace" shared by all American congregations toward more enthusiastic forms of worship (Butler 1992; Warner 1994). This has led many religious leaders to be better at generating vigorous worship than at subtle social interpretation, political conflict, or compromise and negotiation. As a result, these religious traditions require significant cultural work to highlight those elements that can enable political engagement. For example, song, rhetoric, symbolism, and ritual that combine strong aesthetic appeal and rootedness in the worshiping community's own traditions appear to contribute to full engagement in worship life and thus the intensity of shared culture. But these cultural elements must be presented and interpreted in ways that highlight not only their personal and psychological implications, but also their social implications; and the latter must be sufficiently complex to interpret a complex political world, and to encompass the full array of human political life.

In all these ways, religion in the modern world continues to penetrate deeply the key dynamic that Margaret Somers places at the core of the historic origins of democratic public life: the mutually constitutive quality of community associational life, local political cultures, and the construction of public spaces. In social contexts steeped in religious faith and practice—and the global trend in this regard is up, not down—social theory can only illuminate democratic life if it understands the complex interplay of religion and political culture in society.

It thus bodes well that political sociology and political science have recently rediscovered that culture in general and religious culture in particular profoundly shape the democratic life of society. Likewise, scholars of social movements and political culture have recently found religious culture near the heart of some of their core concerns: the challenges of mobilization, the impact of culture on politics, and the constitution of a democratic public realm. This study provides additional theoretical grounding to these findings, and new empirical insight into the microlevel dynamics through which culture shapes politics. Religious culture matters because it is taken seriously by large numbers of people—and thus orients their lives either toward or away from political engagement and the habits of the heart that can sustain it. By making sense of this pattern, social theory can rescue itself from irrelevance in the broader political culture and contribute its part to the revitalization of democracy in America.

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[23] Of course, simplistic political interpretation sometimes generates powerful short-term political mobilization; the focus here is on the cultural tasks of sustaining democratic engagement over the long term.

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